THE MAN WHO LIVED IN A SHOE

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THE MAN WHO LIVED IN A SHOE

BY

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THE ENCHANTED GARDEN, Etc.

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BOOK ONE

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THE MAN WHO LIVED IN A SHOE

CHAPTER I

ARE there any women to-day, I wonder, like the girl wife of Jacopone da Todi, who are found in the midst of worldly brilliance wearing the hair shirt of piety and devotion over their spotless hearts?

I doubt it.

It is no wonder that Jacopone, that "smart" thirteenth-century Italian lawyer, became a great saint when he made that discovery, after his beautiful young wife's accidental death. It would make a saint of anybody.

I am quite sure Gertrude is not like that. But then Gertrude is not my wife — as yet. Nor am I Jacopone. I am nothing more, I fear, than a contented voluptuary of a bookworm. Like King James, I feel that were it my fate to be a captive, I should wish to be shut up in a great library consuming my days among my fellow-prisoners, the blessed books.

To distil the reading of a lifetime into a little wisdom for my poor wits, that has been all my aim and my ambition, if by any name so dynamic as ambition I may call it. An old young man is what I have been called, and Gertrude seems propelled by some potent urge to change me — God knows why.

I have just been talking with — I mean listening to — Gertrude.

We are to be married, she says, in three weeks.

Time out of mind we have been friends, Gertrude and I, as our mothers had been before us. She, the highly modern spinster and I, such as I am, have been linked for years by an engagement which is not an engagement in the old sense at all. It is a sort of *entente cordiale*. An engagement in the conventional meaning of the word would be as abhorrent to Gertrude as the old-fashioned marriage. As soon would she think of "being given in marriage" with bell, book and orange blossoms as of calling herself "Mrs. Randolph Byrd" — or anything but Miss Bayard.

That is what we have been discussing this gloomy afternoon in my snug little apartment before a garrulous fire. For Gertrude is not so absurd as to hesitate to call on me at my apartment any more than I would hesitate to call on her in Gramercy Park.

"But won't it be awkward," I ventured in mild speculation, "if after we are married we have to stay at an hotel together, or share a cabin on a ship — to be Miss Bayard and Mr. Byrd?"

"Don't be absurd, Ranny," retorted Gertrude, with her usual introductory phrase. "Awkward or not, do you think I should give up my name that I have lived under all my life, fought for and established?"

"Of course not," I hastily apologized. "I hadn't thought of that." I could not help wondering what she meant by having established her name. Except as regards one or two committees and vacation funds Gertrude's name is unknown to celebrity.

"You with your H. H.," she ran on briskly, with the triumph of having scored. "Surely you don't want to cling to the musty old formulas?"

"No, certainly not," I answered her readily. I am

no match for Gertrude in argument. Of a sudden I became aware that despite the hissing fire in the grate there was no sparkle in the air this chill November afternoon. The H. H. to which Gertrude had alluded was the only thing resembling an emotion that betrayed any sign of smoldering life within me in that discussion of ours touching matrimony.

The H. H., I would better explain, stands for Horror of Home — for my profound repugnance toward anything resembling the fettering bonds of domesticity. A man, I feel, should be as free to do what he pleases and to go where he likes when and if married as when single. Otherwise who would assume the chains and slavery of that shadowed prison-house? To-morrow, my heart suddenly tells me, I must be off upon a journey of unknown duration.

Once again I would see the estraded gardens of the Riviera, the olive groves of Italy, the sacred parchments and incunabula of the Laurentian Library in Florence. I would wander anew in the wilderness of the Bibliothèque Nationale of Paris and on the left bank of the Seine, where once I collected the lore of Balzac and of Sainte-Beuve. And who dare prevent my setting off at a moment's notice for the ill-lighted rotunda of the British Museum or the cloister precincts of the Bodleian at Oxford? Even as Gertrude was speaking, I experienced an irresistible longing for all those places, for the turf walks and pleached alleys of Oxford and the beautiful "Backs" of the Cambridge Colleges. There is a manuscript at Trinity that I must see again, and I have long promised myself a month in Pepys's old library at Magdelene in Cambridge.

But Gertrude is not like other women.

"What I like about you, Ranny," she remarked, flicking the ash from her cigarette with unerring aim into

the hearth, " is your reasonableness. You hate as I do to see two people handcuffed together like a pair of convicts for life. Might as well go back to the Stone Age or to the times of a dozen children in the house and the mother grilling herself all day before the kitchen fire. Ugh!" and she gave a shudder.

" No fear of that with you," I laughed.

" No, I should hope not," she puffed energetically.

" Well, anyway," I found myself reassuring her quickly, " even as it is, you have three weeks to think it over — to back out in. Three weeks is a good long time, Gertrude. Much can happen in three weeks."

On the table before me lay a new life of Leonardo da Vinci, just arrived from Paris that day. My fingers itched to open it and turn the pages. But that would have been rude, so I forebore.

" I am not like that," Gertrude murmured reflectively, " and you know it, Ranny."

" Of course not," I guiltily assented.

" I know," she tapped my cheek with a playful finger — Gertrude can be very charming if she thinks of it — " I know perfectly what I want to do. And when I make up my mind to do a thing I stick to it."

And so she does, the clever girl!

" I wish I were like you," I muttered. " I am a sort of drifter, I'm afraid."

" That's why you need a manager," laughed Gertrude. " Wait till you've got me. Then you won't be just running after books and telling yourself what you're going to do some day. You'll be doing, publishing, lecturing; you'll be known — famous."

" Oh, my heavens!" I cried out in a terror, throwing up a defensive hand. " I think I'll run away."

" Too late," she smiled, with a cool archness. When

Gertrude smiles she is exceedingly handsome. "I've ordered my trousseau. You wouldn't leave me waiting at the City Hall, would you?"

"I might," I answered, smiling back at her. "If there should happen to be a book auction that morning. And it's only a subway fare back to your flat."

"Now, this is the program," she announced, assuming her magisterial tone, which instantaneously reduces me to a spineless worm before her. "You will come to my flat on the twenty-fourth at ten o'clock. Then we shall drive down in a taxi to the City Hall and get the license — or whatever they call it — "

"Lucky you'll be there," I could not help murmuring. "I should probably get a dog license or a motor-car license instead of the correct one — "

"Then," went on Gertrude, very properly ignoring me, "we can have the alderman of the day sing the necessary song."

"He may want to sing an encore — or kiss the bride," I warned her.

"He won't want to kiss me when I look at him," answered Gertrude imperturbably. Nor will he! "Then," she added, "we can stop here at your place and pick up your hand luggage, and mine on the way to the Grand Central Station. You can send your trunk the day before and I'll send mine. No time lost, you see, no waste, no foolishness."

"Perfect efficiency, in short — "

"Yes," said Gertrude, "you'll probably forget some important detail in the arrangement, but there's time enough to drill you into it the next three weeks."

"Forget," I repeated, somewhat dazedly, I admit. "What is there to forget — except possibly my name, age or color?"

"You needn't worry," flashed Gertrude. "I'll re-

member those for you — when you need them. I meant," she explained, "about your trunk or railway tickets and so on. But anyway, it doesn't matter. I'll remind you of everything the day before."

I promised to tie a knot in my handkerchief.

"And may I ask," I ventured, "where we are going?"

"I haven't decided yet," Gertrude informed me. "I'll let you know later, Ranny dear."

There is something very wholesome and complete about Gertrude. That is the reason, I suppose, I have so long been fond of her. How she can put up with a dreamer like me is more than I can grasp. Without any picturesque or romantic significance to the phrase, I am a sort of beach comber, sunning myself in her cloudless energy on the indolent sands of life. Every one either tells me or implies that Gertrude is far too good for me. Nor do I doubt it. But I wish we could go on as we are without exposing her to the inconvenience of being married to me. But Gertrude knows best.

"Won't you stay and share my humble crust this evening?" I asked her as she rose to go.

"No, thanks, Ranny," she smiled, somewhat enigmatically, I thought. "We shall often dine together — afterwards."

"Of course," I agreed flippantly. "We may even meet at the races."

"I promised," said Gertrude, "to dine at the Club with Stella Blackwelder — to settle some committee matters before I go away. Shall you be alone, poor thing?"

"Yes — but that doesn't matter. I am often alone. I prop up a book against a glass candlestick and the dinner is gone before I am aware of it."

"It might as well be sawdust, for all you know," laughed Gertrude.

"So it might," I told her, "except that Griselda can do better than sawdust. I might, of course," I added, "call up Dibdin and have him feast with me."

"Your trampy friend," commented Gertrude. "Yes, better do it. I don't like to think of you so much alone."

"Now, that is very sweet of you, my dear. I'll do exactly that."

Her cool lips touched mine for an instant and she was gone.

CHAPTER II

To my shame I must record that, once I was alone, the appalling fact of marriage overwhelmed me like a landslide. With a sense of suffocation and wild struggle I longed to do in earnest what I had threatened to do in jest, to run away, blindly, madly, anywhere, to freedom, as far as ever I could go.

When I should have been rejoicing, I desired, in a manner, to sit upon the ground and tell sad stories of the death of kings. I thought upon Lincoln, a brave man if ever one there was, who had paled before the thought of marriage and wrote consoling letters to another in similar case. When I ought to have been feeling at my most virile, I felt unmanned.

Yet, was I a boy to be a prey to these emotions? At twenty-nine surely a man should know his own mind and be in possession of himself. Never before had I doubted my way in life. In a world where every one who has no money proceeds with energy to make it, and every one who has a little tirelessly labors to acquire more, I had wittingly and of full purpose turned my life away from the market place and toward a studious devotion to books. On my compact income of less than two hundred and fifty dollars monthly left me by generous parents, I was able to maintain my modest apartment in Twelfth Street and to live a life, purposeless in the eyes of some, no doubt, but which to me is priceless.

That slender income and the old Scotchwoman, Griselda Dow, with her Biblical austerity and North British

economy, surround my existence with the comfort of a cushion. Because two sparrows sold for one farthing, was to Griselda a reason and an incentive for miracles of thrift. To change all this in three weeks — and I have not yet informed Griselda! In a welter of agitation I began to pace the room.

Perhaps I am a fool to harbor such emotions, but I confess that the sight of my pleasant study, covered to the ceiling with the books that I love, and so many of which I have gathered, fills me with a poignant melancholy. To uproot all this or to change it violently seems like a sin I cannot bring myself to commit. How had I come to think of committing it?

Gertrude is, of course, a splendid girl. With all her energy, she can yet sympathize with the mild successes of a poor bookworm and listen with patience to the tales of his triumphs as though he had captured an army corps. My first edition of the "Religio Medici" can mean nothing to her, who has never read it, but she seemed gladdened by my victory when I acquired it under the very nose of a wily bookseller.

When was it that I had first asked Gertrude to marry me? It is odd that I cannot remember, for our friendship could have continued on the same pleasant basis for the rest of our lives.

I was dining alone with her one evening at her apartment in Gramercy Park, I remember, and there was sparkling Moselle. I am not one of your experienced topers, and that sparkling Moselle entered my blood like a Caxton in a Zaehnsdorf binding or a First Folio of Shakespeare. A golden haze had seemed to emanate from every object in the region of that Moselle. Then, I recollect, Gertrude and I were on a new plane of being.

We were speaking of marriage. Without being "engaged", we were, in Gertrude's phrase, talking of

" marrying each other." It was on that evening I must have asked her, though, oddly enough, I have no recollection of the fact. And now, it seems, three pleasant years have passed and the time has come.

Again it occurred to me abruptly that I had not yet informed Griselda.

What if Gertrude should insist upon my removing myself to her apartment; would she accept Griselda? And how would my precious books be domiciled? How human they are, those books, even though silent! Always I have found them waiting whenever I returned from journeys, from summer visits, from the country, from anywhere. Their backs and bindings seem to shimmer and flash forth a stately greeting, to exhale that subtle fragrance of leather, ink, and paper that none but book-lovers know. They have developed a sense in me to perceive these things as no one else can perceive them. How delightful it has been to find them in their peaceful legions, arrayed and changeless, retaining the very marks and slips I have left in them, faithful servitors and friends!

I take down the " Antigone " in the Cambridge Sophocles that faces me as I stand and open at random to the chorus: " Love, invincible love! who makest havoc of wealth, who keepest vigil on the soft cheek of the maiden; — no immortal can escape thee, nor any among men whose life is for a day; and he to whom thou hast come is mad." It is clear that Sophocles was no modern.

Ah, me! I must tell Griselda at once, lest her Scotch probity should charge me with disingenuousness or evasion. I pressed a bell. I could not face Griselda in the kitchen which is her stronghold. I must summon her to mine.

Griselda, with a heather-blue cap awry on her coarse gray hair, appeared at the door.

"You called?" she demanded.

"Yes, Griselda, I called. Come in; I wish to speak to you."

Griselda has known me since I was seven and all my gravity counts for ever so little with her. So redolent is she of rich encrusted personality that she gives to my poor small apartment the air of an establishment.

"You always call me, Mr. Randolph," she somewhat testily informed me, "just when I have my hands in the dough pan or when the pot is boiling over."

"Which is it now?" I asked her, laughing somewhat ruefully.

"Both," was her laconic answer.

"Hurry back then," I told her. "What I wanted to say will keep."

"Just like a man," muttered Griselda and left me without ceremony.

The relief I felt was shameful. To face Griselda with news of a possible derangement of our lives required a courage, a girding up of one's resolution to which at the moment I felt myself woefully unequal.

There was Dibdin and his blessed archeological expedition. He had told me that there might be a berth for me as a sort of keeper of records and archives. If only he had started last week. In a mist of vision well known to daydreamers, I suddenly saw the trim shipshape steamer with holystoned decks, the glinting metal work, the opulent South-Pacific sun pouring down on lightly clad passengers lounging in deck chairs; girls in white lazily flirting with indolent men. What oceans of joy and ease were to be found in the world for those who knew how to take them!

Ah, well! Gertrude would make no opposition to my going, since absolute individual liberty is the very keystone in the arch of our coming marriage.

I decided to ring up Dibdin.

"Our line is out of order," the switchboard below informed me. "They'll have a man up here as soon as possible."

Frustration! I did not wish the colored door boy below to hear what I said. He has a notion of my dignity.

With a restless agitation new to me I again fell to pacing the room, a room not contrived for exercise. It occurred to me that I must go to see my sister, my only near relative. She was sure to be at home, for she, poor girl, is always at home, — what with her three children and her broken health.

If it were not that the damnable telephone is out of order, I would ring her up immediately. What with her three young children and an income the exact equivalent of my own, she has little diversion unless I take her to the theater or the opera. How does the poor girl manage, I wonder? I dread to ask her and she never complains. I ought to see her oftener; if only she lived nearer than the depths of Brooklyn.

There is the result of romantic marriage for you! Poor Laura committed the error of falling in love with a man on a steamer when she was barely nineteen and marrying him secretly; after seven years and three babies, the scoundrel Pendleton, with his smooth ways and unsteady eye, deserted her, disappeared into the blue. The poor girl's health has never been good since then.

It is irritating to think that I might have done more than an occasional gift for Laura and the children. But I am so wretchedly poor myself.

I still cannot comprehend how Laura could have been so inconceivably foolish as to marry that ruffian Pendleton before she had known him three months—and then to acquire three babies!

Gertrude, at all events, could not be guilty of anything so perverse.

Marriage — children — chains — slavery — how sordid it all is and how disturbing! Good enough perhaps for the hopeless middle class, semi-animal types, who have nothing else to expect of life, or to absorb them. But for folk with ambitions and ideals!

What are my ambitions and ideals, I cannot at times help wondering? Useless to analyze. Freedom to have them is the first of all.

How eager I used to be to discuss them with Laura during those long summers at our cottage in Westchester when life seemed endless and the future infinite. Between sets at tennis I poured out to her the things I was going to do in the world. Laura is only two years older than I, but how well she had understood and how sympathetic she was! It was the motherhood within her, I suppose, that drove her to the marriage and the kiddies.

The scent of those summers comes to my nostrils now, the fragrance of lilac and honeysuckle, that brought ideas to one's head, dreams of achievement, of perfection and happiness. Who has that cottage now, I wonder? Poor Laura's dreams have been distorted into a very dismal sort of reality. And what of my own? But here is Griselda and she is announcing Dibdin.

That grizzled priest of what he is pleased to call science growled in a way he meant to be pleasant as he shouldered into my comfortable study and sank sprawling into my best chair. He never seems quite at home in a civilized room.

"Couldn't get you on the telephone," he remarked. "Thought I'd drop over and see what iniquities you're up to."

"As you see," I told him, "I'm deep in crime."

"Will you feed me?" he demanded with a gruffness that is part of his charm.

"Certainly. What else can I do when you come at this hour?"

"All right; then I'll listen to you," he said.

"But how," I wondered, "do you know I want to say anything?"

"You look charged to the nozzle," he answered elegantly. "What is it — a rare edition of somebody or other?" Amazing devil, Dibdin. I always resent his ability to read me in this manner. But he tells me that in his archeological expeditions he has had so often to watch faces of Indians, Chinese, negroes, Turks and others whose language he did not speak, that to see the desires of men in their eyes amounts with him to an added sense.

"Well, if you must know," I sat down facing him, "I am nonplussed, baffled, perplexed, at sea, on the horns of a dilemma — all of those things. I am to be married in three weeks."

"Eager swain!" was his only comment.

"Is that all you can say?"

"Well, feeling about it the way you seem to feel, I might add that you're a damn fool."

"Tell me something novel!" I retorted irritably.

"Can't," he said. "That's the only thing I know."

"Comprehensive," I sneered.

"Complete," was his succinct rejoinder.

"What a comfort you are!" I cried with a harassed laugh.

"What the devil made you get into it?" he growled.

"Fate," I told him.

"It's a poor fate that doesn't work both ways," he observed.

"I suppose I sound to you like either a brute or a cad

or both," I pursued. "But the fact is, Dibdin, I am not a marrying man. The girl in question has nothing to do with it. She's an admirable, a splendid girl, far too good for the likes of me. But I simply hate the thought of marriage — of owing duties to anybody. I want to be free to do absolutely as I please, to go off with you to the Solomon Islands, or China or Popocatepetl if I want to, or to run after some first edition if I feel inclined. In short, I don't want to bother about wives or children or whooping cough or measles, or have them bother about me. Would you call that selfish?"

"Damnably," said Dibdin without emotion.

"Well, then, that is what I am," I retorted warmly, "and it is no use trying to change. It takes myriad kinds to make a world. I am one kind — that kind."

"No," said Dibdin gravely, "no — I think you're some other kind."

"This eternal, beautiful, boundless freedom," I went on, ignoring him — "surely it is good that some mortals should have it, Dibdin — and I am losing it."

"Three weeks off, did you say — the obsequies?" he queried.

"Yes," I answered sadly.

"Then maybe it won't happen," he remarked to the ceiling.

"What makes you say that?" I caught him up.

"Don't know," he replied in his carefully lazy tone that he assumed when he wished to sound oracular. "Just a feeling — that you deserve something, a good deal — worse than marriage." Then abruptly sitting up in his chair and pulling a thin volume out of his pocket, "Look at this," he muttered.

I took the vellum-bound book and opened it.

"An Elzevir 'Horace'!" I exclaimed. "Where did

you get it?" All the rest of the world and all my cares thinned to insignificance before this treasure.

"A plutocratic book collector living in a mausoleum on Fifth Avenue has just given it to me," he replied. "It's a duplicate. He has another and a better one of the same date. D'you value it any at all?"

"Value it!" I cried, as my fingers caressed it. "Why, certainly I value it. It is a perfectly genuine Elzevir — the great Louis himself printed this at Leyden. It is not what you would call a tall copy, and binders have sacrilegiously spoiled an originally fine broad margin. It's not perfect. But it's a splendid specimen of early printing, with title page and colophon intact. It's a beauty!"

"You beat the devil," murmured Dibdin in his beard. "You can be enthusiastic about some things, that's clear. Anyway, the book is yours," he concluded. "I have no use for it."

"You don't mean it!" I exulted incredulously. "I am simply delighted, Dibdin, tickled pink, as you would say! I have long wanted the Elzevir 'Horace.' I haven't a single Elzevir to compare with this. Think of this coming out of the blue!" And in my foolish way I fell to gloating over the thin, musty little volume, examining the worm drills, holding it up to the light for watermarks in the gray paper and, in general, I suppose, behaving like an imbecile.

"Illustrates my point," muttered Dibdin, fumbling with a malodorous corn cob and a tobacco pouch.

"Point? What point?" I looked up at him abstractedly.

"Out of the blue — this book you say you yearned for — anything may happen."

"And you call yourself a scientist," I marveled, leaning back in the chair. "Things like this happen — yes. But in the serious business of life you're ground between

the millstones of the gods — a victim of events you cannot control. Look at Rabelais and Montaigne, two free spirits if ever there were any. Yet one was a victim of priestcraft so that he cried out until he roared with orgiastic laughter, and the other a victim of property, — took a wife that disgusted him. (I have beautiful editions of both of them, by the way, which you ought to look at.) But each of them was a victim."

"A victim if you're victimized." Dibdin puffed at his foul pipe. (I cannot make him smoke a decent cigarette.) "But if you know how to play with circumstances, you use them as I saw a cowboy in Arizona ride a bucking broncho. You ride them till you break them. Look at me, my boy," he went on, with a grin of mingled modesty and bravado. "I knew I was a tramp at heart. But my people would have been broken with humiliation if I had turned out a 'hobo' on their hands. So I took to ruins and buried cities in out-of-the-way places, and politely speaking I'm an archeologist. But I tramp about the world to my heart's content."

That, I admit, presented Dibdin and the whole matter in a new light to me.

"Why," I finally asked, "didn't I do that?"

"Because you're not a tramp at heart," puffed Dibdin.

"Yes, I am!" I almost shouted at him. "That is exactly what I must be, since I have such a horror of home, of domesticity."

"You with all this comfort — a flat, a housekeeper, all the truck in this room? No, no, my boy! You're cast for something else. Hanged if I know for what, though. These things are too deep to generalize about. Time will tell."

I rose and circled the room, inanely surveying "this comfort" that seems to offend Dibdin, though he likes well enough to sprawl in my best arm-chair. The books,

the rugs, the fire, the alluring chairs, the happy hours that I have spent here seemed to crowd about me like the ghosts of familiars, praying to be not driven from their haunts.

"Then why the devil," I demanded accusingly, pausing before him, "did you encourage me and praise my little papers and bits of work in college when you were teaching me?"

"Trying to teach you," he corrected placidly. "You've never been a teacher in a large fashionable college, my boy. When most of your so-called students are taking your course because it is reported to be a snap, so they can spend their evenings at billiards, musical comedies, or the like, any young devil with a ray of intellectual interest becomes the teacher's golden-haired boy. Even teachers are human. You'll admit you haven't set even so much as your own ink-well on fire as yet."

"All that is beside the point," I returned irritably. "Here I am in the devil of a fix and you are talking like Job's comforters."

"Yes," he agreed, "I suppose I am. But in the end it was not the comforters but events that pulled Job up. Await events with resignation and expectancy, Randolph, my lad, and play the game. Stake your coin and wait until the wheel stops and see what happens."

"A fine teacher you are!" I laughed at him, albeit mirthlessly.

"No good at all," he assented cheerfully, knocking his pipe against the ash tray and pocketing the noisome thing. "And didn't I chuck teaching the minute events made it possible? Events, my boy; they are the teacher and the deities to tie to. Set up a little altar to the great god Event — right here in your perfumed little temple. That's what I should do," he concluded, muttering into his beard.

"Incidentally," he added, "I'm getting extraordinarily hungry."

"Oh, sorry," I murmured. "Glad you're here to eat with me, anyway. It enables me to put off breaking the news of my coming marriage to Griselda."

"What — you haven't told her yet?" shouted Dibdin, sitting up in his chair. "That fine, upright Highland lassie? Then you're no disciple of mine! Face things with courage and face 'em fairly, Randolph. Go and tell her now! I'll wait here with my highly moral support."

"I — I can't," I blurted miserably.

"Yes, you can," he insisted with obstinacy. "Go and do it now."

With a gesture of desperation I pressed the bell.

"If I am going to tell her anything," I mumbled between my teeth, "I'll say it right here." Dibdin laughed ghoulishly.

"This cowardice — this shrinking from life," he philosophized detestably — "that's what our kind of education brings about."

Griselda appeared at the door.

"You rang, Mr. Randolph."

"Yes — er — yes, Griselda," and I felt myself idiotically hot and flushed. "I wanted to say — " and beads of perspiration prickled my forehead. Then in desperation, I stammered out,

"Mr. Dibdin, Griselda — he is dining here to-night — that's all, Griselda!"

Dibdin's laugh rattled throatily in the room. How I hated him at that moment! Griselda swept us with an impenetrable glance.

"There is a place laid for him," she uttered in the tone of one whose patience is a sternly acquired virtue. And she left us.

"Better strip, my lad," chuckled Dibdin, "and put on your wrestling trunks."

"What d'you mean?" I demanded sulkily.

"The tussle that life is going to give you will be a caution."

"A lot you know about life!"

"Not much, that's a fact," Dibdin observed more soberly. "But I've had to face some things, Randolph. I've had to grin at a lot of greasy Arabs in the desert who thought they would hold me for ransom. I've had to laugh out of their dull ambition a pack of villainous Chinese thugs in Gobi, who felt it would profit them to cut my throat. I've had to make my way alone through a jungle in Central America for days when the beastly natives absconded with the supplies and left me in the middle of a job of excavation. I've had other little episodes. But never, son, I may say truthfully, have I shown such blue funk as you did just then before the patient Griselda."

"Rot!" was my only answer. "Let's go in to dinner."

It is after ten. Old Dibdin is gone and I have been putting down these foolish notes.

It must be by some odd law of balance or compensation, I suppose, that those whose lives are least important keep the fullest record of them. It is a weakness of mine to wish to read in the future the things I failed to do in the past. It is really for you, O Randolph Byrd, aged seventy, that I am writing these notes.

If only Gertrude had made up her masterful mind to three months hence, instead of three weeks, I should have taken my last fling and gone by the next boat to Italy.

Biagi, that courteous scholar and humanist, writes me from the Laurentian at Florence that he has discovered

some new material concerning Brunetto Latini — the teacher of Dante. Among the few ambitions that I dally with there has always been the one to write a life of Brunetto, who taught Dante how a man may become immortal. I have a fine copy of Ser Brunetto's works, the "Tesoro" and the "Tesoretto", and it seems a shabby enough little encyclopedia in verse of knowledge now somewhat out of date. There must have been, therefore, something in the man himself that enabled Dante to attribute his own greatness to the teacher.

But I cannot go to Florence and return in three weeks.

Gertrude, I know, will tell me I can do it after we're married. But she will expect me to "clean up the job" in two weeks.

There is nothing about Gertrude that terrifies me so much as her efficiency. I shall never dare to mention the subject to her, and so I shall never attempt it and never know the mystery of Dante's immortality. It is all one, however; what have I to do with greatness? No more than with marriage.

Bur-r-r! The room is cold. *Sparge ligna super foco,* as cheerful old Horace advises. I have just complied and put another log on the fire.

My nerves must be a shade off color to-night. I could have sworn a moment ago, as the room grew chilly, that my sister Laura was standing before me. It is my guilty conscience, I suppose. Too late to call her now. Besides, the telephone is no doubt still "out of order." Poor Laura! I saw her, white as death, with tears running down her drawn cheeks. What things are human nerves when a bit unstrung! I shall go and see Laura to-morrow.

I have had my conversation with Griselda and it came off not amiss.

"Griselda," I began carelessly, after Dibdin had gone, "did I mention to you that I am to be married in three weeks?"

Griselda is not one to waste breath in futile and flamboyant feminine exclamations. She turned somewhat pale, I thought.

"You know very well you did not," she answered in level tones, polishing a spoon the while.

"Well, I meant to," I told her truthfully enough. "Didn't you expect it?"

"No, sir," was her blunt reply.

"Neither did I," I blurted out before I knew it.

A wry, unaccustomed smile for a moment illumined her dark, gypsy-like features.

"You needn't tell me that," she retorted, and I wonder what she meant by it. It is not like her to waste words. "Am I," she continued, "to take this as notice to find a new place?"

"God forbid!" I cried in horror. "Whatever happens, Griselda, you remain with me — let that be understood."

"And suppose Miss Bayard shouldn't want me?" she demanded with quiet intensity.

"Then she will probably not want me," I told her. "That question won't arise. Besides, Griselda," I went on, "we haven't decided yet how we are going to manage. Miss Bayard will probably want to keep her apartment and I mine. She would hardly wish to be bothered with me all the time."

"And you would call that marriage!" exclaimed Griselda aghast.

"Why not?" I queried mildly. "I don't know much about it, Griselda, but marriage is determined by the kind of license you get at the City Hall and what the alderman says to you. The leases of apartments have

nothing to do with it, I'm quite sure — though I might inquire."

Griselda's face was blank for a moment. Then on a sudden she was bent double in a gale of wild, hysterical laughter. Never have I known her so shaken by meaningless cachinnation. Perhaps her own nerves are no better than mine. Even now I still hear her rattling deeply from time to time like muffled thunder. But I don't care now. What a relief to get it over!

It is nearly bedtime. Casting over the events of the day, I cannot but conclude that my own will has played too small a part in the whole matter.

I must see Gertrude to-morrow in good time and acquaint her with my desire to run over to Florence before we are married and look up Biagi's new material bearing upon the blessed old heathen, Brunetto Latini. Since Gertrude desires me to be great and famous, she cannot deny me the opportunity to discover how a great and famous man accomplished the trick. Besides, what has been delayed three years can surely support a further delay of three months.

But, good heavens! What is this? Voices — the scuffling of feet in the hallway — what army is invading me at this hour! I believe I hear children's voices — and a scream from Griselda, who has never screamed in her life!

CHAPTER III

LAURA — my dear sister Laura — is dead! Her children are with me!

Without warning she dropped suddenly under her burdens and with her dying breath confided her children to me — *me!*

That one cataclysmic fact has taken its abode in my brain and numbed it as well as all my nerves to a chill and deadly paralysis that excludes everything else. It still seems wholly unbelievable — some nightmare from which I shall awake with a vast sickly sort of relief to the old custom of my tranquil life.

The turbulence and the pain of the last three days, however, are still lashing about me like the angry waves after a tempest, in a manner too realistic for any dream. I am broad awake now, I know, and for hours I have been blankly staring into a very abyss of darkness.

What will happen or what I shall do next, I haven't the shadow of an idea.

Laura is dead and her children are with me, and I am their guardian and sole reliance. Who could have forecast such a fate or such a rôle for me? Three days! It is incredible! Only three days ago, I was languidly protesting because I could not take ship forthwith for Italy to examine some manuscript at the Laurentian in Florence!

No, by heavens! It was not I. It was some one else — some one I knew vaguely, in a past age, a man to be

envied, serene and cheerful, blest of life, whom I shall never meet again.

The last three days! I cannot banish them and yet I cannot meet the memory of them. Was it I who faced the tragedy, or was it some one else? Nothing surely is more tragic than a young mother's death — and that young mother my own sister! Who was it that stonily passed through the ordeal of the "arrangements" and the black pantomime of the sepulture? I cannot record it even for myself, for never, I know, shall I desire to be reminded of it. At the death of my mother, I still had Laura with her practical woman's sense. But now I was alone. I say now because however remote it seems, this tragedy will always be present. My life must forever remain under its stupefying spell.

It is not credible that only three days ago I sat here in my study revolving trifles, those many shining trifles that went to make up my former life.

Three days ago the silence of this house was disturbed by the voices of children, the clatter of their feet, and for the first time in my life I heard Griselda scream.

"Oh, Mr. Randolph," she rushed in, sobbing, with the dry tearless sobs of those much acquainted with grief, "Miss Laura — she — the children are here!"

I knew. Though inwardly I sank all but lifeless under the blow, I knew clearly that Laura was dead.

"Is she very ill?" I heard myself asking faintly, with a clutching desire to shrink still from the appalling truth.

"She — oh, Mr. Randolph," she lamented, "don't you understand — ye know very well!" she suddenly added with a harshness that surprised me. "We shall have to put the children to bed in your bedroom."

It was as though she had suddenly revolted at the softness of the atmosphere in my environment, at any

artificiality or evasion. She seemed abruptly determined to face the stark facts in the open.

"The girl will sleep with me," she concluded tonelessly and turned to go.

"Which girl?" I queried dazedly.

"Her that brought the bairns," she replied and left me.

"Send her in here — I want to speak to her!" I shouted after Griselda. I could not face the thought of going out there. I was held to my chair by a sheer pitiful lack of courage to move into the dreadful gulf before me.

I closed my eyes and endeavored to still the tumult in my brain into silence. I wanted to think. But only those can achieve silence who do not need it. I could not. I opened my eyes.

A thin little girl of perhaps twelve or thirteen stood before me. This surely could not be the girl Griselda had referred to in charge of the children. She was herself a child. Were my disordered senses tricking me? I experienced the thrill Poe's hero must have felt at sight of the raven on the bust of Pallas.

"Who are you?" I whispered.

"I am Alicia, sir," she answered with large, frightened gray eyes fastened upon mine.

"What — what is it?" I stammered.

"The lady said you wanted to see me."

"Did you bring the children?" I breathed, incredulous.

"Yes, sir."

I was awestruck. Her eyes were the eyes of a child yet they were filled with sorrow and a searching fear old as the world.

"How old are you?" I could not help asking, with an irrelevance foolish enough in the circumstances.

"Going on fourteen, sir."

"And you — you are the nurse?"

"I helped Mrs. Pendleton with the children before school and after school," she answered with more assurance now, but still uneasy. "I am a mother's helper, sir." There was no mirth in my soul, but the muscles contorted my features into a sickly grin.

"I see," I murmured mendaciously. But I saw only my own confused turpitude at my blindness and neglect in face of the shifts and needs poor Laura had been compelled to suffer.

"Where do you come from?" I inquired with a dry throat, ashamed to ask anything of importance.

"From — the Home for — Dependent Children — in Sullivan County," she murmured hesitatingly, with a tinge of color in her cheeks. On a sudden I saw her pale lips tremble and guiltily I realized that, thoughtless, after my wont, I was subjecting her to an ordeal merely because I was in torment.

"Sit down," I forced myself to speak evenly, "and tell me exactly what happened."

She sidled to the big chair, her gaze still fixed upon me, as though to watch me was henceforth her first anxiety. She gripped the arm of the chair and hung undecided for a moment as though fearful of making herself so much at home as to sit down in this room.

"Sit down," I reiterated more encouragingly, "and tell me what happened to my sister."

"Yes, sir," she murmured obediently, perching on the edge of the great chair. "Well," she began, "when I came home from school in the afternoon Mrs. Pendleton was lying down. The children were hanging about her bed and she looked very pale."

"Yes, yes," I urged her on impatiently.

"Then I took them downstairs and gave them their bread and milk and tried to read to them so as to keep

them quiet. But only the littlest one, Jimmie, wanted to listen. Randolph and Laura wanted to play Kings and Queens." I realized that I must hear the story in the girl's own way.

"Then," she continued, with an effort at exactitude, "I thought that Jimmie and I had better join them, because then I could keep them from making so much noise. We played until supper time. But Mrs. Pendleton didn't feel well enough to come down. So the children and I had supper downstairs and Hattie — that's the cook — took Mrs. Pendleton's supper up on a tray."

That must have been while I was lamenting to Dibdin over the hardness of my lot.

"Then what happened?" I muttered, turning away from her gaze.

"I went up to see if Mrs. Pendleton wanted anything," she resumed nervously, frightened by my movement, "and she said no, but that she'd get up later when it was time for them to go to bed. So I helped them with their lessons until bedtime and Mrs. Pendleton came down. She said she felt a little better, but she looked very sad and white. And when she began to walk up the stairs —" her lips grew tremulous again and the tears dashed out of her eyes, but she finally controlled herself bravely.

"— She fell — and —" she began to weep bitterly, "she just said, 'The children — my brother — telephone —' and that was all —" and that piteous child who was no kindred to my poor sister sobbed convulsively.

That must have been about the time when I was at table with Dibdin and, over the sauterne, complaining to him of the narrowness of my income in view of the lacunæ and wants of my library.

"We couldn't — get you — on the telephone," she

found breath to utter at last. "So I brought the children here — Hattie told me how to go — Hattie's over there alone."

Nothing in this world can ever stab me again as the poignancy of her recital stabbed me. My life seemed shattered, irreparable. All my dreams were at an end. Laura was gone and here were her children thrust by destiny upon my hands — unless their scoundrel of a father should ever return to relieve me of them. I had lived peacefully and harmlessly in my way, but for some inscrutable reason Fate had selected me for her heaviest blow.

"Very well," I told her as kindly as I could in the conditions, "now you go back to Griselda and go to bed. I'll have to think things out."

"Oh — but the house!" exclaimed the little girl — and never again do I wish to see such horror on a childish countenance as at that instant froze the features of little Alicia. "All alone," she added, her thin shoulders heaving. "Aren't you going over now, sir?"

"Now!" I exclaimed, looking automatically at my watch. "Why — yes — in a few minutes, child."

"But — Hattie is there alone — " she stammered. "There's nobody else — then I'd better go back."

It was obvious, of course, that I must go at once. But why should a child see spontaneously that to which I am obtuse?

"Oh, well, you are right, of course — I must go immediately — I hadn't thought — I'll go over now" — and I turned away from her, lifted the curtain and gazed out into the wet, murky street below. Life had collapsed and the ruins of it were tumbled about my hot ears. I hardly know how long I stood there, completely oblivious of the girl Alicia.

"Please, Mr. Byrd," I was startled to hear a tearful,

childish voice behind me — "won't you see the children before you go, sir?"

I wheeled about sharply.

"The children? Oh, yes — no!" The horror of the situation fell about me like an avalanche that had hung suspended for a moment and then crashed smotheringly over me. "No," I whispered huskily, "I can't — not now — not now!" A kind of chill darkness numbed my senses.

Like a pistol shot I suddenly heard the harsh voice of Griselda in the doorway.

"The cab is at the door, Mr. Randolph. Don't forget your rubbers."

And like an automaton galvanized into life I found myself whirling to the house of death.

CHAPTER IV

For a week the children have been with me and nothing has yet been done about them. Another week, I think, will drive me mad with indecision.

I seem unable to emerge from the shadow of mystery and terror into which my serene world has been so suddenly plunged. The book-lined study is my solitary refuge; and like a schoolgirl I can do no more than unpack my heart with words.

I have seen Gertrude.

It is astonishing how resourceless are even one's nearest and dearest friends in face of anything really capital.

"Poor Ranny! How ghastly!" Gertrude cried, when she first heard of it, wringing my hand. "But buck up, dear boy. You know how I feel. There is a way out for everything." She spoke, I thought, as though I were in need of ready money.

She was here this afternoon to see the children. Gertrude is no hand with children. They seemed strangely shy of her, a woman, though they literally fell upon the neck of growling, grizzled old Dibdin. They are still subdued by the suddenness of their tragedy, though real sorrow Gertrude tells me, is, thank Heaven, beyond them.

"We'll have to think up a way of disposing of the dear things," she remarked briskly. And though I am myself completely at a loss what to do with them, I cannot say I relished her way of putting it.

"What, for instance, could you suggest?" I inquired dully.

"Schools, Ranny dear, schools," she impatiently answered. "There are homelike places run by splendid women — just made for such cases. Why, even the little one — Jimmie, is it? — How old is he; four? — There are places even for kiddies as young as that."

A heavy confusion, the reverse of enthusiasm, oppressed me.

"You forget, Gertrude," I endeavored as gently as possible to remind her, "Laura confided those children to me with her dying breath — to *me* — her only relative. Do you think I ought to fling them out at once, God knows where!"

"Good Lord, Ranny!" she cried, flushing with a smile of anger peculiar to Gertrude when she is annoyed. "What a sentimentalist you are at bottom — after all!"

"A sentimentalist — I?" I felt hurt. "Just put yourself in my place, Gertrude, and see how easy such a decision would be for you."

"I do, Ranny; that is just what I am doing," she insisted impatiently. "But don't you see that if there is any one thing you cannot do, it is to keep them here — or in my apartment?"

"Yes," I said, "I see that. But I also see that I can't pitch them out among total strangers, a week after their mother's —" I could not trust my foolish voice to finish.

"Do you forget," demanded Gertrude with her smile that brands me imbecile, "do you forget, Ranny, that we are to be married in two weeks?"

"No, Gertrude — far from it. But that is why we are discussing this problem — because it is perplexing. Besides, schools of the right sort are bound to be pretty expensive things."

"Oh," said Gertrude, "of course. But poor Laura's income ought to be enough —"

"My dear Gertrude, that is what I don't know. Car-

michael is to give me an accounting of it to-day or to-morrow. Laura never spoke of her money matters to me. But, as you say, there will probably be enough. Only, it isn't altogether that — you see, Gertrude — " I floundered.

" Yes, I see, Ranny, I see," she hammered at me in the maddening way women have. " You simply can't get up enough will power to do something. It's the old story. But you'll have to, my dear," and she smiled sweetly. " You have all my sympathy and all the coöperation you'll take. But the one thing we can't do is stand still. You understand that — don't you, Ranny? "

" Yes. I understand that. But my brain is as fertile of plans as a glass door knob."

" I'll tell you what I'll do, Ranny," Gertrude summarized. " I know all this has been a great shock to you. I'll let you alone for a couple of days to turn things over. And think of what I've said. But then we must come to some definite decision. I'd give anything if this terrible thing had not happened now — but it can't be helped, can it? "

Now, that was very sweet and reasonable of Gertrude. And it is a thousand pities that she feels distressed. But it would have been ten thousand more if poor Laura had died just after we had been married instead of before. As it is, the problem before me is largely mine. Were we now married, Gertrude must have had to bear an undue share of it.

Shall I ever win back to the old tranquillity and the peace that was mine? That was the first thought that came to me when I parted from Gertrude, a selfish thought as I immediately realized, in view of what is facing me. I can no longer think as I have thought and new feelings are struggling for birth within me, commensurate with the new responsibility. The world, as I

walk through it, seems to present an aspect strangely different from what it did a week ago. It is so chill and alien and hollow!

As I was reëntering my study I heard a crash in the dining room, which is now the children's room, and when I glanced in upon them the girl Alicia was gathering up smithereens of glass and Ranny, the eldest boy, quietly announced, "It broke" in a manner that so obviously gave him away, all the others could not help laughing; and they laughed the louder when I joined them. Confused and angry, the boy ran out of the room.

It is a world apart, the world of children, into which parents, I suppose, grow gradually. Not being the parent of these children, I fear I shall never penetrate it.

Sooner or later they must be sent away, even as Gertrude maintains. And I must face that event forthwith.

I was interrupted at this point by the irruption into the room of Jimmie, the youngest, inimitably, grotesquely shapeless in his nightgear, pattering toward me and taking refuge between my knees. He was being pursued by the girl Alicia who stood shyly and distressfully smiling in the doorway, as though all explanation were futile.

"Well, old boy, what is it?" I demanded with mock severity, though in truth I was more afraid of him than he evidently was of me.

"Iwantsayprayerstoyoulikeamummy," he uttered in one excited breath, as though it were one single word.

"You want what?"

"He says he wants to say his prayers to you, sir," spoke up the girl clearly. "I am sorry — he broke away. Shall I take him away, sir?"

"Wanto say my prayers to you like to mummy," insisted Laura's child, scrambling upon my knees. And with a pang of sadness that set all my senses aching I saw the picture of the past — poor Laura with her sweet,

resigned face, living when she lived only in her children, listening to the prayers of this sprite with the silken sunshine in his hair.

"All right, Jimmie," I murmured faintly, as he clung to me; "go ahead."

Tightly clutching me about the neck and nestling his face against mine, he brought forth with childish throaty sweetness the few words to the creative Spirit that mankind the world over, in one form or another, addresses as Our Father. "And God," he concluded with brilliant triumph in his eyes, "bless Mummy and Uncle Ranny."

Nothing that I can remember has ever moved me as that child moved me. Like St. Catherine of Genoa at her decisive confessional I seemed to receive a profound inner wound by that child's act, tender and bitter and sweet, that I never desire to heal. For the moment Laura and I were nearer to being one than ever we had been in her lifetime. Nevermore shall I forget the sweetness and fragrance of that little child and his warm nestling faith in me. And I am planning to cast him off.

"Come, now," interposed Alicia, as though breaking a spell.

"One more hug," cried Jimmie, with the arrogance of righteousness. And suiting his action to his words, he clambered down with engaging clumsiness from my knees and padded toward Alicia. Once more I was alone with my thoughts.

Can it be that some instinct in the child whose heart is still imbedded in his mother's had made him seek the one person who had been nearest his mother?

I cannot say, I cannot say.

Oh, God — and I must send him and the others, Laura's children, away, away among strangers!

There seems to be no other way out.

I have been turning idly the pages of books in a way bookish people have, seeking for inspiration, for some word of guidance. Brunetto tells me on the word of St. Bernard, that tarnished gold is better than shining copper; and that the wild ass brays once every hour and thus makes an excellent timepiece for his savage neighborhood. But nothing of this casts a glimmer of light upon my dilemma. Rabelais keeps shouting from his yellow page, "*fais ce que voudras.*" But what is it that I desire to do?

Ah, I know what I desire to do! There is counsel in the old books, after all.

I will have in the girl Alicia, and see what I can glean. She was brought up without kith or kin of her own. And though an institution is more of a machine than a good school, still those who had the rearing of her were total strangers. There might be some gleam of suggestion in that.

Alicia has been here.

"Come, child, sit down," I invited her, observing that she still displayed a tendency to stand in awe of me. "I wish to ask you some questions." But her tense little face was still haunted by a vague fear. "It's about the children," I added, and she seemed somewhat more at ease on the edge of her chair.

"How long were you at that Home — in Sullivan County?" I began, grinning by way of ingratiating myself.

"Ever since I can remember, sir," she answered.

"Were they kind to you?"

"Oh, yes, sir."

"How kind? — What did they do for you?"

"They gave us food and — and medicine when we were sick. And on Christmas we had a tree. Only no-

body ever came to see me. I always looked out of the window for somebody to come. But no one came."

"Yes, yes, I know," I pursued. "But did they show you affection — sympathy?"

Alicia was silent.

"Don't you know what I mean?" I pressed.

"Yes, sir, I think I do."

"Then why don't you answer?"

"I — it's hard to explain," and she laughed a frightened little laugh. "There is no one there to — to do those things you said. There were five hundred of us there. If you're not sick you just go on like all the rest. If you're sick they give you oil or something. Sometimes a child pretends it's sick just so the matron or a nurse might take it in her lap and make a fuss over it. And some are naughty — for the same reason."

I nodded gravely, but my heart was gripped by a poignant aching. I saw Laura's children compelled to feign illness or delinquency in order to receive a touch of individual attention which, I suppose, every child spontaneously craves.

"Were you glad to leave there?" I asked.

"Oh, yes, sir!" she answered eagerly.

"Tragic, my poor sister dying," I said, half to myself. "She was an ideal mother. Now — I hardly know what to do."

Alicia leaped from her chair and came yearning toward me. Her little face tremulous and working, she cried out:

"Oh, Mr. Byrd, you won't send us away — to a Home — will you?"

"No, no! — Not to a Home," I replied defensively. "But schools — there must be good places for children — "

"They'd feel terribly," she stifled a sob. "They love

it so here — Even here Laura cries for her mother every night — and little Jimmie — "

"Never mind," I took her up hastily, "nothing is decided yet, my dear child. I'm glad I spoke to you. You see," I ran on, "there's so little room here, and I — I know nothing about children —"

"But there's nothing to do," she protested, sobbing.

"Nothing?" I smiled vaguely in an effort to cheer her and laid my hand upon her thin shoulder.

"Nothing except just love them," she said. "I'll take care of them — all I can." How simple!

"Well, well, we shall see," I aimed to be reassuring.

"Do I have to go — back to the Home?" she asked brokenly, with an arm hiding her face.

"Oh, no, certainly not," I answered hastily. "We'll find a better way than that. Now," I added, "be a good girl, dry your eyes; run along and don't say a word about — our conversation."

"No, sir," she murmured obediently. And still gulping, she left me.

It is obvious that the girl Alicia has been of decisive help to me!

Yet it is equally obvious that I cannot keep the children here.

Dibdin has been here and he has left me in a state of distraction, worse if possible than that I had been in before.

The good fellow endeavored to be vastly and solidly cheering.

"All nonsense," he growled, "about children being hostages to fortune. They are the only contribution a human being really makes to the world. All the digging that burrowing animals such as I do in the four corners of the earth, all the fuss that fellows in laboratories make

over test tubes and microscopes and metals and germs, all the stuff that people sat up nights to put into those damned books of yours — all of that is done for them — for the next generation and the generations they will beget."

"Eloquent!" I flippantly mocked him; "but how is it you've elected to be what you call a tramp?"

"Elected?" he grunted disdainfully. "I didn't elect. It elected me. Besides," he continued, lowering his voice, "I would have given it up like a shot — given up anything, changed my life inside out, done anything if I had been able to marry the one woman I wanted. I'm one of those strange beasts for whom there is only one woman in the world — no other:

> 'If heaven would make me such another world
> Of one entire and perfect chrysolite,
> I'd not have sold her for it,'

he quoted, and added with a hoarse laugh, "you ought to know your Othello."

"Then why on earth didn't you marry her?" I could not help marveling.

"Too late," he murmured, with a whimsical smiling twitch to his head, that is very engaging. "She was already married to somebody else when I first saw her. Too late," he repeated with ruminative sadness. "But don't let us talk about that," he broke off abruptly. "Have the kids begun to go to school yet?"

"What is the use?" I answered him gloomily. "I haven't formed any plans for them yet."

"Plans? What do you mean?" he inquired, puzzled. Like the girl Alicia he seemed to think there was nothing to do that required any thought. And I wondered if the simple souls in life are only the improvident or the very young.

"Do you see this place," I demanded irritably, "as a home for a family with three children, to say nothing of a fourth in attendance upon them?"

"Have to have a larger place — farther out — of course," he answered glibly, puffing at his pipe.

"And am I a person to take care of and bring up three or four children?"

"Why the devil not?" he demanded.

"Why the devil yes?" I retorted fiercely. "What do I know about children? What experience have I had? Do you see me as a wet nurse to a lot of babies?"

"Wet nurse be hanged," he responded gruffly. "Here's your first chance to be of use in the world and — you talk like that —"

"Easy to talk," ruefully from me.

"Well, what the blazes do you mean to do?"

"That is what I am trying to work out," I fell upon him bitterly. "D'you think it's easy? I've got to work out some plan — find homes for them — the right kind of schools — with a home environment. Oh, it's easy, I assure you! Besides," I ran on savagely, "you seem to forget I'm to be married in two weeks."

"I did forget that," growled Dibdin, with a semblance of contrition. "What does the lady say?"

"Well, what should she say? Could you expect a girl on her wedding day to become the harassed mother of three children not her own?"

Dibdin jumped from his chair, ground an oath between his teeth and his forehead was a file of wrinkles.

"Listen, Randolph," he began in another voice. "It's damnably tough, and I know it. But you can't, you simply can't disperse your sister's children to God knows where. You are the only relation they've got. Put yourself in their place. It would be damnation. If you need — more money," he stammered in confusion, "why, dash

it — I'm an old enough friend of yours to — to advance you some, eh?"

And he laughed raucously, wiping the perspiration from his forehead.

"You are a good sort — of tramp," I grinned sheepishly, seizing his hand. "But it isn't that. I don't know as yet what Laura left them. But it isn't that. I feel like — like hell about it — but what can I do — what with Gertrude and — and everything else. Oh, it's the easiest thing in the world, I assure you.— But I wish to God I could see my way to keeping them!"

"Easy or not," said Dibdin huskily, "if you send those children away, I'll break every bone in your body."

I laughed almost hysterically. I know Dibdin. When he is most moved and most sympathetic, he is at his most violent.

"Don't go," I clung to him as with sunken head he shouldered toward the door.

"Must," he growled. "I've got to think, too."

"I wish you had married, Dibdin, and had children of your own," I all but whispered with my hand on his shoulder. "And I'm sorry for the woman. You're a good devil, Dibdin. I wish I knew who the woman is."

"I'll tell you," murmured Dibdin, with a queer throatiness of tone. "I'll tell you who she was. It can't matter now. She was — No, by God! I can't — not now!"

And he shuffled out, leaving me gazing after him speechless and open-mouthed.

CHAPTER V

THE girl Alicia keeps watching me like some bewildered household animal dimly aware of the breaking up of its household. Always I am conscious of her great eyes upon me. To her, I presume, I am a Setebos who can inflict pain and torture, like Death himself; who can disrupt her little world of clinging affections by the merest movement of my hand.

I am in that process of turning things over to which Gertrude has indulgently consigned me and I am if anything farther away from a decision than I was twenty-four hours ago. I finger my books and open at random a volume of Florio's "Montaigne" in an edition that is as fragrant of good ink and paper as the Tudor English is rich, and the first line that falls under my eye is that of Seneca, "*He that lives not somewhat to others, liveth little to himself.*" Does this mean that my long absorption in my own small concerns has made me incapable of decision in anything of importance — that I live too little?

I stole into the bedroom last night where the children were sleeping, while Griselda was making up my couch in the study.

With their flushed faces they lay there almost visibly glowing before my eyes with that perfect faith that children seem to have in the grown-up world about them. Heine somewhere speaks of angels guarding the child's couch, and it is not sheer poetry. Their faith and trust,

still illusioned, brevets, I suppose, to angelic rank every one about them. Randolph, with a slight frown and moving lips, dreaming seemingly of something active and strenuous, as befits his ripe age of eleven; Laura, serene with her mother's countenance and straying curls, and little Jimmie with his tumbled hair like that of some child by Praxiteles or Phidias — they slept — secure in their trust, despite their recent shattering bereavement.

No one can really know anything about children until he has seen them sleeping. Like fortune, they are always trustfully in the lap of the gods. Never before had they touched me as they seemed to touch the hidden springs in me at that moment. It was so, I pictured, that Laura was wont to steal into their dormitory of nights before going to bed; and that vision, no doubt, was a potent help to her courage to continue uncomplainingly and brave in the face of sorrow, humiliation and her self-effacing loneliness. Would I had been able to picture such things more clearly while she was living.

Griselda surprised me emerging from the room and she smiled, the austere, inscrutable Griselda, with such a smile as Michelangelo might have depicted on the face of one of his Sistine Sybils, those weird sisters who seem to know all things because they have suffered all.

I muttered a casual good night to Griselda and brushed by her nonchalantly, as a boy whistles with apparent carelessness when he feels most awkward or uneasy.

I slept upon my problem in the way old wives advise you, but to-day I am no nearer the solution.

I keep trying coolly to imagine them in appropriately chosen schools and homes, and yet some tugging at my heart strings, some strange alchemy of the brain, wipes out those images before they are formed and replaces them with the vision I saw last night in my invaded bedroom.

Who is to help me make a choice? And before I have put down these words I realize that no one will help me. My dining room is at this moment vocal with their laughter — but something within me is more loudly clamorous yet against the treachery I am planning them. Treachery! That is nonsense, of course. I have a perfect right to decide what I choose. But already that word keeps recurring in my brain whenever I envisage their dispersal.

My decision is taken.

I can hardly say who made it. In reality, I suppose it has made itself. But however it came about, there — heaven help me! — it is.

Gertrude telephoned that she was coming this afternoon. I offered to go to her, but she would drop in, she graciously insisted, now that I was a family man, after lunching with a friend at the Brevoort.

Gertrude's entry is always breezy and cheerful.

"Hello, Ranny," she murmured lightly, sinking on the sofa and holding out both hands. I took them, kissed them and held them in mine. I was well aware that for her these were days of tension.

"That's nice," said Gertrude with a laugh. "But what I want is a cigarette, a match and an ash tray."

"Of course, how stupid of me!" I mumbled and supplied her with her wants.

"Those books, Ranny," she puffed, scanning my laden shelves, "they terrify me afresh every time I see them — when I think you've read them all."

"They needn't alarm you," I deprecated quite sincerely. "The more I read them the less I seem to know — as you will agree." And I sat facing her.

"No room for the brains to turn round in?" she laughed. "Oh, come, dear boy, it's not so bad as that.

I really think," she added more soberly, " you have a very wise old bean on your shoulders."

" What sudden and startling discovery leads you to words so rash? " I inquired.

" I've made the discovery all right," she nodded with emphasis. " Anybody who can handle a situation like this the way you're handling it is no piker."

Gertrude often affects the slang of the day as a humorous protest against what she terms my purism. But the truth is, I like the vernacular myself.

" Impart it," I urged her, whereat she smiled.

" Regular street Arab you are," she declared with arch satire, " but what I mean is this. I am always one for quick action — and I don't know much about children. I urged you to send them away at once. But I realize now that so soon after poor Laura's passing away that would have been cruel — and it wouldn't have looked well, besides. Now I see it more your way, Ranny."

" You do! " I could not help exclaiming.

" Yes," she continued firmly. " I see your way is best. I see that we can be quietly married and have our little trip just the same. Then, when we come back, in the natural course of events and rearrangement, we can look up places for them and settle it all right as rain. That's what you had in your clever old head, Ranny, I'm quite sure — and I admire you for it."

" I see," I gasped, wondering what words or acts of mine had conveyed this elaborate strategy to Gertrude. For the space of a minute perhaps I was sunk in thought. The vision of the children asleep in their innocent faith in me suddenly arose vividly and smote me to the heart. The nestling image of Jimmie — the girl Alicia with her great, wistful eyes telling me that there was nothing to do " but just love them " — all this was throbbing in my brain with every heartbeat. And had I in reality schemed

out the intricate design with which Gertrude now credited me? By no cudgeling of my poor brains could I recall any such devising. It was impossible. It was new to me. Then something in me that is either better or worse than myself took the reins of the occasion and, like the auditor of another's speech, I heard myself saying with solemn firmness:

"No, Gertrude — you must have mistaken me. I had no such plan. We shall be married, of course, but our marriage can make no difference. I cannot turn these children, Laura's children, out of the house. Not now, at all events, not until they're older. They have no one in the world but me and I mean to keep them."

"Mean to keep them! You mean that?" she gasped. And it pained me to be the cause of a deep flush on Gertrude's face and neck.

"I've never meant anything more certainly in my life," I told her.

"Then we can't marry," said Gertrude in a low tone, still scrutinizing me as though she were wondering whether she had ever met me before.

"Why not?" I cried. "Why should they make so great a difference? In any case, didn't you have an idea that we would each keep our separate flats?"

"Don't talk rot," flared Gertrude in an exasperation which I still deplore, for the steely glitter in her eyes was not pleasant. "I am not going to make myself ridiculous by marrying a houseful of kids for whom my husband is the nurse. Do you really stick to that, Ranny?"

"Yes, Gertrude," I nodded. "I must."

Gertrude gazed at me searchingly for a moment, then to my amazement she laughed in my face, a trifle louder than her wont. Laughter was at that instant far from my thoughts.

"Oh, well," she resumed her earlier lightness of tone, "then we'll simply postpone our marriage a while. You'll get tired of this maternity game, Ranny, depend on it. We've postponed it three years — a few months more can't make much difference, can it?"

Then she approached me and took my hand.

"Little boy's tender conscience must be given its fling, mustn't it?" she began mockingly, in imitation of a child's speech, in which she does not excel. "Never mind, give its little whim its head."

A remarkable woman, is Gertrude.

"Perhaps it's only proper," she concluded more seriously, "that we should postpone it, since you are just now in mourning."

"Nonsense," I answered her. "Laura would certainly never have desired any such thing. Our marriage will not be a thing of pomp and orange blossoms. We could just as well get married now as any other time."

"No, Ranny," she replied decisively. "Now it's my turn to be firm. I think I am right."

I should honestly have preferred, in spite of the conditions that surrounded me, to have married Gertrude then and there without further delay. We are neither of us young things full of ineffable inanities on the subject of romance and I experienced a sober desire for all possible finality in the midst of the jumbled and painful confusion into which Fate had seen fit to cast me. But Gertrude was obdurate.

Just as she was about to go there was a gentle tap on the door. Gertrude, whose hand was already on the knob, opened it. It was the girl Alicia.

With a downward quizzical glance Gertrude fixed the girl so that for a moment she stood fascinated, unable to detach her eyes from Gertrude's. She turned them in

my direction finally and they were troubled and imploring.

"Please, Mr. Byrd," she said, "the children want to go for a walk now, instead of lessons. The sun is out. Can I take them?"

"Yes, yes," I said hastily. "By all means."

"Wait a minute," commanded Gertrude, smiling mechanically. "What is your name, child?"

"Alicia, ma'am."

"Alicia what?"

"Alicia Palmer," and the child's voice was tremulous with trepidation.

"And do you give the children lessons?"

"Yes, ma'am," she answered, lowering her eyes as though a crime had found her out.

"And how old are you?" asked Gertrude not unkindly.

"Going on fourteen, ma'am." The girl looked up at once, responsive to the gentler tone. But wishing to relieve her of the interrogatory, I lamely put in a word urging that she take the children out at once before the sun had disappeared. The girl glided away like a shadow.

"Why, she's quite attractive — the little thing," murmured Gertrude. "You'll have quite a menagerie." Then, laughingly turning to me, she cried, "Oh, Ranny, Efficiency ought to be your middle name."

"Perhaps I'd better adopt it?" I murmured.

"Do," said Gertrude. "Well, so long, old boy, I must be running." And in her haste she even forgot to let me kiss her good-by.

So after all the alderman at the City Hall was not to sing his song over us yet. For no reason that I can help I seem to be in disgrace with fortune, Gertrude and aldermen's eyes.

A nameless melancholy, a kind of humorous sadness, has taken possession of me.

It is not my lost tranquillity that I regret now, nor does Gertrude's taunt of inefficiency disturb me. But at bottom I have always realized the type of man that I am not. The type of man who stands four-square in face of all the shocks and emergencies of life, who can meet all changes and events with equal courage, who can take any situation smilingly by the hand as though he were its indisputable and indulgent master, that is the sort of man I should wish to be. But all my own defects clamorously accuse me of embodying the exact opposite of such an ideal. I have shrunk away from life until it fits me like a coarse ill-cut garment rather than a glove. It takes a vast deal of living to be alive, and the dread obsession haunts me that I have become as one mummified in this dim catacomb of books.

I have been to Carmichael's office at his request and the blow that he has dealt me is heavier than any since Laura's death.

Laura, it appears, in her desperate desire to increase her income, had been speculating in the lying promises of oil and mining stocks which offered fabulous returns. One after another her substantial railway and steel bonds went to her brokers for "margins" and some were sold for current livelihood. No wonder she was compelled to resort to an orphanage for a "mother's helper", who is herself a child. The result is that something less than two thousand dollars of Laura's capital remains for her three motherless and fatherless children, the oldest of whom is eleven.

I have no doubt but that her tortured and silent anxiety on this score hastened my poor sister's death. Carmichael himself, her lawyer and adviser, was ignorant of

her acts until it was too late. The dread goddess Fortune plainly does nothing by halves. If it were not for my grief over the suffering that poor Laura must have endured so uncomplainingly, I should be moved to uproarious laughter. Job, I feel sure, must have had his moments when the comforters were not there, when he laughed until the tears bedewed his dejected old beard.

And I, incompetent recluse that I am, have undertaken the care and the rearing of three children! I should at least admire the completeness with which Fate plays her hands or produces her situations, were I not at this moment utterly and stonily impervious to all thought and all emotion — unless an inert and deadly sense of disaster be an emotion.

No, that was not enough. What a glutton is that same Fate! Dibdin has been here to say a hasty good-by.

He has heard of a ship that sails from San Francisco in a week and that will touch at his particular group of islands, so that he will not have to trans-ship at Papeete, as had been his earlier plan. I have never before in my life felt so utterly alone!

He laughed a curious laugh, that seemed foolish yet exulting, when I told him I had decided to keep the children. His eyes glittered and he turned away for an instant to hide them.

"Look here," he muttered hoarsely, with the assumption of his most matter-of-fact manner, "let me advance you a thousand dollars or so — in case you should have a use for it. Be an investment for me," he added, with a short laugh. "What use is it to me in the Marquesas or Solomon Islands, eh?"

"No, thanks, Dibdin," I told him. "I can mention one or two good banks on the Island of Manhattan — if you don't know of any."

"Don't be an ass, Randolph," he came back with severity. "I'll write you a cheque."

"No, you won't," I replied with equal obstinacy. "I won't take it. If I need it, I'll cable you."

"Devil you will," he growled irritably. "Cables don't run where I'll be. You're an ass, after all."

"Thanks. Would you like to see the children before you go?"

"H'm, yes," he answered meditatively. "No, by gosh!" he added in sudden confusion. "No, I can't. Got to run. Slews of things still to do."

Inscrutable devil, Dibdin! Who would have supposed him such a bundle of oddly-assorted emotions?

"By the way," he said abruptly, as he was starting, "Carmichael — heard from him — everything all right?"

Inwardly I felt a tug as though some one had pulled violently upon some cord inside me.

"Oh, yes," I lied as urbanely as I was able, "everything quite all right. You'll keep me in addresses, I suppose?"

He scrutinized me for an instant so searchingly that with a tremor I feared he would see through me.

"Oh, yes, of course," he finally answered. "The Hotel de France, Papeete, is a good address until you hear of another. They know me there."

"Good," I tapped him on the back. "Write a fellow a word whenever you can. Pretty lonely here after you're gone."

"Lonely!" he repeated. "And you — oh, by George, and I'd almost forgotten — and you to be married in a few days — lonely!"

"That's — off," I faltered — "for the present."

"Off!" he exclaimed aghast. "Did she break it off?"

"Put it off," I corrected.

"When you told her of keeping the kids?"

I nodded my head slowly, watching the odd play of his features.

He opened his arms quickly as though he were about to hug me like some grizzly old bear — then as quickly he dropped them, shamefaced.

"By God!" he uttered solemnly. "This — this gets me — the way things came about. You — you are a man, Randolph, my lad. Courage — that wins everything in the end. Even when it loses, it wins. Yes, sir."

I have not the remotest idea what he meant by those words.

"Broken up about it?" he demanded abruptly.

What my gesture proclaimed to Dibdin I don't know. For me it expressed all that I had passed through during the last ten days.

"No, you're right. No use," he said, clapping me on the shoulder. "Sit tight, my boy. Courage — the only thing! Now, good-by," he wrung my hand, "and God bless you."

"Same to you, old boy, and best of luck."

And now the only intimate friend I possess has gone and left a hole in the atmosphere as large as Central Park.

CHAPTER VI

An odd look of overt approval I have surprised of late in Griselda's eyes causes me a peculiar twinge of regret. It shows that new conditions have overwhelmingly ousted the old. Griselda never troubled to approve of me before. I have no desire for any change in Griselda, even for the better.

I have been successful, however, I am bound to record. I have found an outdoor school for Ranny and Laura in Macdougal Street near Washington Square, and a nearby kindergarten for Jimmie. The girl Alicia is able to take Ranny and Laura to Macdougal Street on the way to her own public school. Jimmie, who does not go until later in the morning, is a problem. Thus far I have been conducting him to his kindergarten myself. But obviously that cannot continue, despite the fact that Jimmie, seeing his elder brother depart with two girls, turns to me with a look of inimitable superiority and observes:

"We men must stick together, mustn't we, Uncle Ranny."

I gravely agree with him on the general policy, though I aim to forestall future trouble by indicating that expediency often governs these things.

The term bills paid in advance to the schools have left a gap in my exchequer. For the first time I have been compelled to decline a genuine bargain. Andrews, the bookseller, called me up with the announcement that he had something I could not resist. Laughing, I asked him to name it.

"It is nothing less than Boswell's 'Johnson'," he told me with particular solemnity, "*first edition,* with the misprint on page 135 — *a beautiful copy.*"

"Dated April 10, 1791?"

"Dated April 10, 1791," he repeated with impressive triumph. My heart sank, though it was beating loudly. For many years I have had an order for that Boswell.

"And the price?" I murmured faintly.

"For you," he said, "four hundred dollars."

Griselda would approve of me blatantly did she know the courage it required to answer Andrews.

"No, friend, I am sorry but I cannot afford it at present."

Andrews was incredulous. "Do I hear you correctly?" he queried.

"Accurately," I told him, "if you hear that I can't take it."

"Then I refuse to accept the evidence of my ears," he retorted with spirit. "I shall send it down to you." I told him it was useless. "Oh, you needn't buy it," he shouted. "But I insist on giving an old customer the pleasure of seeing it at his leisure, in his own library."

A shrewd, good devil is Andrews, even though he is a good salesman. I have been feasting my senses on the Boswell, but it will have to go back.

Dibdin's going so abruptly has left me very heavy at times upon my own hands. He had a way of dropping in unannounced when you least expected him, so that I came to count upon him at unexpected moments. There is no one to take his place. Now on clear evenings I ramble aimlessly northward and often turn in at the club, though so little have I been a frequenter of it I hardly know a soul in the place. Last night I ran into my classmate, Fred Salmon, for the first time in months.

Fred is, I should say, my exact antithesis. He is full of laughter and noise and exuberance. Riches are his goal in life, and if he expended one half the vitality on the acquisition of riches that he devotes to the collection of humorous anecdotes, he would be a wealthy man to-day.

"Hello, Ranny," he shouted when he saw me, "you're just in time to join me in a little refreshment. What you doing now?" Luckily he seldom waits for an answer. With trained rapidity he gave his order to a waiter and continued, "Come across any rare editions lately, any fine copies, such as 'Skeezicks' or 'Toodlums' by Gazook?"

"No," I told him, "my collection is lacking in those masterpieces."

"Tell you what you ought to be, Ranny," he boomed, as the waiter put down the glasses. "You ought to be (here's how!) — a bond salesman!" he decided after a pause and gulped down his liquor; — "or else a dog fancier."

"Why those exalted callings?" I asked with only the mildest curiosity.

"You are such a simp and you look so damn honest," he elucidated, "that anybody would believe anything you say."

"Then will you believe me if I say I don't want to be either of those things — or anything else?"

"Oh, sure!" he responded heartily. "I know that all right. You haven't got anything on me. I'd rather own a few good horses and follow the races round the tracks of the world, if I had my choice. Instead of which I've got to separate the world from enough dollars to keep me going. If ever you get hard up, Ran," he concluded reflectively, "let me know. I'll set you up in the right game. Never make a mistake. I took a course in

character reading for five dollars — by correspondence — that's how I know so much."

Dollars! Dollars! Dollars! Must every one then become merely a dollar-amassing machine? I remember Fred in college, ruddy with the freshness of youth, when he was making jokes for the *Lampoon* and, so abundant was his energy, everybody expected him to do Great Things. And now he can talk of nothing but dollars — and he doesn't seem to be oversupplied with those. I am nothing myself, but at least no one expected anything of me.

Fred proposed that we play a game of poker, bridge, checkers or cribbage. But as none of those manly sports tempted me at the moment we parted and he cordially informed me that he would look me up one day.

Nevertheless, with all his noise and emptiness, Fred was glowing, or seemed to be glowing to me. His ideas are puerile. His talk is cast in one mold, upon one design, that of evoking laughter. But he is alive. He is not apathetic. That is what I deplore in myself, the apathy that has saturated me after the recent events, that are like a dark liquid which has entered my mind at one point and then by natural action unchecked has stained every fiber of my being. It is not thus I shall acquit myself of the task I have assumed. I must become *alive!*

The children, I am beginning to think, are the only creatures really alive in this world. They don't hanker after musty-smelling first editions, after knowledge of bygone old worthies like Ser Brunetto some seven centuries dead, nor yet after the eternal conversion of life into dollars.

To-day I witnessed a curious excrescence of their bubbling imaginations. My door standing open, I was able to observe a ceremony that transformed my dining room into a church and the four infants with solemn faces into

the vivid celebrants of the sacrament of marriage. They are evidently ignorant of the "alderman" method. To the delight of Jimmie and Laura, Ranny, my oldest nephew, with hieratic pomp, was being married to the girl Alicia. Even she knew better than to laugh as the boy was slipping a ring upon her finger, murmuring some gibberish which he had either learned or invented, and endowing her with all his worldly goods. The goods consisted first of all in the number of a hundred kisses, which the boy proceeded to administer with savage realism to the crowing delight of Jimmie and the uncontrollable giggling of Laura. This part of the endowment being finally completed, he brought forth from his pocket a small toy pistol and gravely placed it in her hand. I nearly jumped from my chair when I saw that. A pistol of all things! What could have made the little apes think of that? What a text for a cynic! Perhaps every bride ought to receive a pistol as part of her wedding dower? They then proceeded merrily to eat bits of cake and to laugh and chatter like any other wedding guests. I closed my door softly and for a space I was lost in reflection. For it suddenly came to me that to approach life with anything less than the playful zest of children was a grim, a fatal error.

It was odd that Gertrude should have chosen that hour to evince the only sign since her decision that she had any memory of me. When she came in, preceded by the knock and laconic announcement of Griselda, the first words she spoke were:

"Well, Ranny, and how is domesticity?"

"Highly educative," I told her, as I ministered to her usual wants. "I have just learned the proper way of marrying a woman."

"Indeed?" murmured Gertrude, somewhat sourly, I thought, "and how is that?"

"It's not the alderman that is important," I informed her. "It's done with a hundred kisses and a pistol." In reply to her look of incomprehension, I described to her the episode of the dining room. To my surprise Gertrude could see no humor in that.

"What a child you are, Ranny," she shook her head sadly. "And I thought that with all your faults you were a serious person."

"That must have been your fundamental mistake about me," I answered somewhat sheepishly and yet nettled. "I fear I am not half as serious as the children are."

"No," said Gertrude. Then after a brief pause, "Have you decided yet that the children ought to be sent away to schools?"

"Why, no, Gertrude! Such a thing has not entered my head since — since we talked of it," I told her.

"Ranny," she solemnly leaned forward, "I think I know what's troubling you. You needn't be so foolishly proud with me. It's a question of money, I take it. Well, I'm ready to help out with their bills. I know these things are expensive. I am willing to set aside part of my income for their bills. We could arrange that part of it somehow. Why, you foolish boy, won't you take me into your confidence?"

"It isn't that — at all," I stammered. "Why won't you understand — it's the children themselves. How can I throw them over?"

"You don't think you're doing anything for them here — you and this foundling-asylum girl, who comes from goodness knows what parents? Better let me manage this —"

Curiously, I felt offended at her speaking thus of the girl Alicia who seems as integrally a part of my charge and household as any of the rest.

"It's very good of you, Gertrude," I muttered, "to offer so much. But to take money from you for my sister's children is — out of the question." This put her more than ever out of temper.

"I never knew any one quite so idiotic," she retorted caustically. "You can do nothing yourself and you won't let anybody who can, help you." And after smoking in silence for a few minutes, Gertrude turned from me in disgust. Very smartly dressed she was, too, with a most becoming winter hat and handsome furs. I should like to please Gertrude. But she seems unable to grasp my point of view, namely, that touching those children I feel my responsibility to be personal.

"If only some one nearer to them than myself turned up," I murmured abjectly, "you'd see me bundling them out so quick it would make their little heads buzz."

"Nearer," she repeated vaguely, "when you know there is no such person."

"Their father, for instance," I explained. "I have no reason to think him dead. Laura had always felt certain he was alive. There are all sorts of explanations possible for his absence. He may come back, you know."

Gertrude laughed at me bitterly.

"The only likely explanation," she retorted, "is that he was tired of his wife and children. He is probably having a good time somewhere with some one who knows how to hold him."

That was a phrase that stung me. Why must she slur my poor sister now in her grave? I bowed my head but I could not reply even though I admit to a feeling of gloomy certainty that Jim Pendleton will never return.

"Good-by," said Gertrude, smiling grimly at me.

"Au revoir," I answered, letting her out. But she paid no further heed to me.

Why I should vent my undeniable irritation upon Alicia I do not know. But I called her into my study as soon as Gertrude had gone and she entered smiling brightly. The child, I believe, looks considerably happier than she did when first she came here and her eyes are less wistful. I was conscious of the sternness of a hanging judge upon my visage. But Alicia ignored my mood. Possibly she has found me out and knows that I am least to be feared when in appearance most despotic.

"Alicia," I began severely, "how are the children getting on? Are they all right?" (What an imbecile query!)

"Oh, yes, sir," she wonderingly answered.

"I mean — are they happy here?" I scowled at her.

"Yes, sir — they think it's lovely."

"Are they — are they afraid of me?" I demanded austerely, looking grimly at my finger nails.

"No-o, sir," she stammered, "they — they are not."

I was terrifying the child, I realized with a pang. But when I looked up suddenly the little vixen seemed to be struggling with laughter — though that can hardly be. She had the manners to turn away. An attaching little baggage is this child, but I'll have no nonsense.

"And you —" I pulled her up sharply, too sharply perhaps, whereat I grinned in mitigation —

"Do you feel competent to go on taking care of them?"

"Oh," she gasped — no suspicion of laughter now — "I just love it — Oh, you're not thinking of — of sending me away, after all, Mr. Byrd?"

There was a catch in the poor girl's voice and I felt stupid and brutal.

"No — no," I growled judicially. "Not at all. I merely wanted to make sure that there is no trouble of

any sort. I suggest that you report to me every day or two upon anything that occurs to you — that you think I ought to know."

"Yes, sir," she faltered, "I will, sir."

"Have they clothes and shoes and things — warm enough for this weather?"

"Oh, yes, sir — heaps," she answered, smiling again.

"And you, have you everything you need?"

"Why, yes, sir — I think I have." Her shoes seemed thin and worn. I was in no mood to be superficial or evasive.

"Are those the best shoes you have?"

"Yes, sir," she answered faintly. Her calico frock also seemed extremely thin.

"That is all," I dismissed her curtly. "Ask Griselda to come to me, please."

"Griselda," I began, genial enough to one that is not in awe of me, "I wish you would look over the girl Alicia's wardrobe and get her whatever she needs in the way of shoes and things. Would you mind doing that?"

"Ay, I'll do it, Mr. Randolph. I know some cheap places in Fourteenth Street —"

"Heaven forbid, Griselda," I interrupted her. "I won't have that. There is enough inequality and heart-burning in the world without putting it among children. No, no. Buy the things where you bought the others — for Miss Laura's children."

Griselda laughed hoarsely.

"You'll not begin ruining the lassie with gaudy clothes!" she exclaimed.

"No, Griselda, I'll not. Good clothes have never yet ruined anybody," I gave her as my genuine conviction. "It's the other way about. It's poor clothes eat at the vitals of your self-respect like the fox in the tale of the Spartan lad."

"Have ye gone into the bills for the clothes for the bairns?" she flung at me.

"Not yet," I answered mildly. "But I'll make a walking tour through them one of these days."

"You'll walk backwards when you do, I'm thinking," flung out Griselda, and disappeared, muttering. In Griselda's lexicon extravagance is synonymous with crime and even outtops it. But she is certain to do as I ask.

There was a book auction to-day. And two days having elapsed since my interview with Gertrude I was sufficiently myself, when I lay down the paper announcing it, to think of going. The news of an auction still has the effect upon me that a bugle might exert upon some battered, superannuated cavalry horse. Despite the rise of the plutocratic collector, despite the shoals of dealers who have made of book-buying almost an exact science, I still dream of encountering one day the fortune of Edward Malone, who, late in the eighteenth century, bought Shakespeare's sonnets in the edition of 1609 and a first printing of the "Rape of Lucrece", all for two guineas.

I had already conducted Jimmie to his kindergarten. On the way, as he nestled his hand more firmly in mine, he looked up at me with a humorous smile and informed me that "we men have won'erful times together." It gave me a curious thrill and I felt grateful even for this companionship in my solitary life which Gertrude and so many others find foolish and despicable.

I was letting myself out at the front door when a plain, large-mouthed young woman of perhaps thirty, austerely garbed in black, stood facing me. I remained for a moment bereft of speech and then, of course, I foolishly apologized, I don't know why — perhaps for encumbering the earth.

"You wish to see Griselda?" I mumbled, with my hat in my hand.

"No," she declared, scrutinizing me in the murky hallway. "I want to see Mr. Randolph Byrd."

"I am he," I told her.

"I should like to talk to you," she said in a low voice. Mentally I waved a sad farewell to the book auction and to any bargains it might hold and led the way to my study.

"I am at your service," I told her, grinning, and all but offered her a cigarette.

"It's about the little girl, Alicia Palmer," she began hesitantly as though she had something dreadful to impart.

"Are you her teacher?" I wonderingly asked.

"No, Mr. Byrd, I am from the Home for Dependent Children — I am one of the inspectors."

"Ah, I see. You wish to — to inspect her," I blundered on stupidly, whereat she laughed.

"No — not exactly," she smiled. "To tell the truth, Mr. Byrd, I wish to inspect you —"

"Well, this is all there is of me," I broke in.

"And I want," she added, "to take her back to the Home."

"Take her back!" I cried, stung by something in her tone. "But — but why?"

"We don't allow our girls to live in the homes of bachelors," she murmured, lowering her eyes for an instant.

"Oh!" I gasped feebly. It is my eternal wrongness that seems to be at the bottom of everything. The picture of the children upon my hands without the girl Alicia swept me with a chill dismay.

"It ought to have been reported to us," she said reprovingly. "It really ought."

"What ought to have been reported?" I groped in bewilderment.

"The change — the transfer. We sent Alicia to Mrs. Pendleton," she explained. "When Mrs. Pendleton — er — died, we ought to have been notified — so we could look after her."

"I understand," I murmured weakly. "You see, my sister's death was so sudden that nobody thought of such things. I didn't even know she had taken this girl from your Home."

In my blundering way I then explained to her how the children came here, of their attachment to Alicia and of my own absurd dependence upon her — which I abruptly realized. I told her quite truthfully, I believe, that now the children could not get on without her. And the bitter thought assailed me that nothing in this world that is pleasant or fitting or agreeable can long be left unshattered; that everything human and sweet and tranquil must be by some human hands undone. What a miserably destructive race we are!

"Well," I concluded sadly, "I suppose now you'll take her away — and what I shall do with these three children is beyond me."

To my surprise, as I looked up, I distinctly saw a tear glisten in her eye. She looked away.

"You have a great many books," she observed with nervous irrelevance.

"The result of a misspent life," I sighed.

"Well, I don't know what to do or say," she said, rising awkwardly. "I'd like to see Alicia and — the other children. And I'll have to report — I shall call up the matron of the Home on the telephone."

"Won't you do it now?" I eagerly prompted.

"I'd better see Alicia first, I think — when will she be in?"

"At lunch time," I said; "won't you stay, or come to lunch?"

She seemed to recall that this was that obscene environment, the home of a bachelor.

"No, thank you," she murmured primly. "I'd better come again in the afternoon. Would three-thirty do all right?"

"Admirably," I told her.

"I'll do the very best I can," she reassured me.

"That's very good of you," I answered from a grateful heart.

Farewell, auctions! Farewell, peace! Once again I am in troubled waters, predestined like a bit of flotsam to bob about only in storm. Obscurely, deep within me, I long for power to do everything, to arrange everything, to make my world swing about me rhythmically instead of my lurching about it drunkenly. Even on this secret page, meant for no eyes but mine, I would pour out my grief and tragedy, the eternal underlying sadness of life — and then rise up a man of will and energy to manage my affairs. Instead, I can only weakly scribble ineptitudes to while away the time until a poor underpaid girl inspectress returns to pronounce sentence upon me. Am I, or am I not, to be allowed to live within hailing of tranquillity? Gertrude, I am wretchedly afraid, was right after all. What business has a manikin like myself to look with bold eyes upon duty, or to grapple with responsibility which an ordinary man would assume as if adding another key to his key-ring — to pocket and forget?

Falstaff could not have been more genial or hilarious than I feel at this moment, nor yet the ancient Pistol. When I left the dining room a few minutes ago, my dignity would have suffered permanent eclipse had the

children espied me after I closed my door. I capered about the room like some rheumatic goat lilting a wild melody *sotto voce*.

The inspectress has pointed her thumbs upward. I hardly know whether Alicia, the children or Griselda decided the issue favorably.

"Do you wish to see Alicia alone?" I asked the inspectress when she returned. She will never know, that nice plain girl, with what tension I had awaited her. No lover she may have had has ever kept a tryst for her more tremulously — or she would not now be Miss Smith.

"No," was her reply, "she is only a child. I want to see her with the children." Alicia was already prepared and, I am bound to admit, partially primed.

"Here is Miss Smith, come to see you, Alicia," I announced with assumed lightness, as I ushered the lady in. Oh, it was very distinctly "ushered."

"How do you do, Alicia," Miss Smith held out her hand, melting at the sight of the children in the midst of play. "How are you — well and happy?"

"Oh, so happy!" answered Alicia, coming forward with flushed cheeks. "I am so glad you came."

"But why didn't you write us, child?" was the gentle remonstrance.

"I am awfully sorry, Miss Smith," from contrite Alicia. "But the time passed so quickly — I was just going to — and I had to get new clothes — and there are so many things to do."

Miss Smith looked down at Alicia's clothes dubiously. Perhaps she thought their quality too ruinously good for one of the inmates of her Home. She then glanced at the silent, wondering children.

"Hello, Miss Smith!" they cried in broken chorus, catching her eye. It was she who had originally brought

Alicia to them. "You won't take Alicia away, will you?" Laura spoke up bravely.

"Why, dear? — Wouldn't you like to have her go away?" she returned, smiling uncertainly.

"No! We wouldn't!" replied all the children actually in one voice, with little Jimmie loudest, whereat we both laughed.

"Who," demanded Randolph sternly, "will sew our buttons on?"

"And who'll give me my baf?" cried Jimmie.

"Or help us with our lessons?" put in Laura.

"Well, we'll see!" Miss Smith came back brightly. I believe that young woman is genuinely fond of children. "What are you playing just now?"

They all began to explain at once.

"Shall I leave you with them?" I murmured.

"Yes — I'll stay a minute or two," she nodded — and I tiptoed out to await doom.

When I returned a few minutes later, I heard to my surprise Griselda's voice, just before I opened the door, rising to the full height of her indignation:

"If this is no fitting, then nothing is fitting — " whereupon I opened the door.

The children had disappeared. Griselda with flashing eyes was literally towering over poor Miss Smith. Evidently Griselda had been bearing testimony. Most excellent witness, Griselda! What chance had any Miss Smith against a rock of sheer personality like Griselda?

"It's all right," Miss Smith announced, smiling faintly as I entered. "I called up the matron this noon and she left it in my hands. This is an exception — the first of its kind in our institution — but I mean to let Alicia stay. She — she seems so happy here," she added, faltering.

"That's very gracious of you," I bowed. "I thank you. Shall we — tell them your decision?"

Griselda opened the door of the bedroom where they all had been cooped up like so many frightened little hares, and Randolph, unable to contain himself, demanded eagerly:

"Can she stay?"

"Yes," nodded Miss Smith, and wild shouts must have shattered the nerves of the other tenants. Jimmie, as a mark of highest favor, ran to Miss Smith and held forth his arms to be taken up into hers. He could not bestow a greater confidence. Alicia dabbed some happy tears from her cheeks. I begged Miss Smith to stay to tea with them and unobtrusively escaped. Now my mind is agog with triumphant imaginings. If ever I become President, Griselda of a certainty shall be my Secretary of State.

CHAPTER VII

Now that the Christmas holidays have passed and I have been casting up accounts, the uneasy knowledge has come to me that I am no longer living on my income. The freshet of bills is surging about me yet. Perhaps I have been improvident, but I have not bought a book in ages. Andrews, the bookseller, informed me the other day, with an expression more of sorrow than of anger, that though he couldn't comprehend my unaccountable refusal of the Boswell, he had not the heart to offer it to any one else. He was holding it still, he declared, in order to spare a friend regrets.

"Sell it, Andrews, for God's sake — sell it," I told him.

"But you've had your order in for three years," he protested, "and never canceled it. Now suddenly you refuse it. That must mean something!"

"It means — I'll tell you what it means, Andrews: I have acquired a young family." I then briefly explained to him my situation.

"You don't tell me, Mr. Byrd — you don't tell me!" he repeated over and over. "Then this is what I do," he announced with a sudden ferocity of decision. "I hold that work, if I have to hold it for ten years, until such a time as you feel you can take it. Only I am so short of room here," he added blandly, "will you not store it for me on your shelves?"

"Why, you — you Samaritan!" I laughed in my em-

barrassment, clapping him on the shoulder. "What are you trying to do — make a bankrupt of me?"

"If you will include it under your insurance —" he answered — "but never mind: I'll insure it myself." And then he talked of something else. He was as good as his word. Before I reached home that Boswell was here and is now on my shelves. I have been gloating over that epic of personality and it occurs to me that Johnson and Griselda are kindred of the spirit.

Two months! It is incredible. Years must have passed since the children have come here. My past life seems remote as ancient Egypt. This morning came a letter from Biagi of the Laurentian, asking why he did not hear from me, when was I coming to Florence, and adding that at Oxford also some Brunetto Latini material has been recently unearthed and that I might stop on the way and examine it. I laughed. Gone are those days, never, I fear, to return. If only I could smell a good old parchment once again! I still remember the thrill I felt when Biagi first showed me the vellum script of Sophocles at the Laurentian. I could actually *see* the scribe in the Byzantium of the eleventh century reverently copying the lofty beautiful words, in a spirit of high worship, his pale cheeks flushed with his pious task. I *was* that scribe! Why, I ask, was that strange and eager feeling implanted in my particular bosom? Could it be that in some past age, I was myself the scholarly Greek? — But that is nonsense.

If only I could pay my bills. Yet I dare not touch the trifle Laura left to her children. That must remain for emergency.

And on May first we must change our quarters. The renting agent, a decent enough little person, was very apologetic.

"I have kids myself," he informed me deprecatingly,

"and I know what it is. But *you* understand. A bachelor is one thing and four children is quite another. Makes a difference." I told him that I was more or less aware of the difference it made.

"And these people here, in this here, now, building," he explained, "they're so nasty nice — they can't stand the sight of a kid, let alone the sound." I made no comment, for too recently had I been just so nasty-nice.

We shall have to seek some pastures new.

Fred Salmon, as good as his word, has actually looked me up.

I don't know why the mere entry of that breezy Mohock into the room brought my unwilling fatherhood into a relief ten times sharper than I had felt it before. I suddenly felt myself a gawk and a failure before a man of the world — even though I did not wholly respect the man of the world. Once more I was acutely aware of lost freedom. Abstract Freedom, out of which I had stepped as a man steps from life into death.

Luckily Fred is not one to beat about the bush.

"You remember," he began, skillfully rotating the mutilated end of a cigar between his teeth, "my telling you at the club the kind of business you'd be suited for?"

"A bond salesman or a dog fancier," I answered promptly.

"Have you gone into anything?"

I replied in the negative.

"Well, I'm thinking of starting something," he announced solemnly.

"A dog kennel?" I queried.

"No — a bond business, Ran."

"I wish you luck, my boy," I told him.

"None of that —" he grinned, "I want you to go in with me."

I gazed at him in speechless astonishment.

"Have I said a bellyful?" he demanded, removing his vile cigar.

"A — yes," I gasped, "and more."

"Ha! That's the way I am," he laughed. "Ideas come to me and I act upon them."

"But — what have I done — " I began, stammering, "to deserve this — "

"You're the man for my money," he erupted boisterously. "I sometimes make a mistake in picking a horse, but never in picking a man, Ranny, my boy, never!"

When Henry the Fowler was tranquilly snaring finches and news was suddenly brought him that he had been elected Emperor, I doubt whether he had felt more completely graveled than did I at that moment. But to be serious with Fred Salmon was just then beyond me.

"You have come to the right man, this time, Fred," I gave him back a parody of his own tone, "not a doubt of it!"

"You bet I have, old Hoss," he cried, "don't I know it?"

"That is," I went on, "if fitness, training, experience, capacity, predilection and abundance of capital are factors, you have selected the one man — "

"Yah!" broke in Fred, "I know all about that. Don't try the sarcastic with me, old boy. I know all you can say and a darn sight more. But I told you it's the cut of your mug I want. What good is the best trained two-year old if he's a hammer-head? It's with a man as with a horse. You've got the right look to you — and that's what counts!"

The mockery of my thanks and all further attempts at clumsy satire were utterly ignored by Fred.

"You're comfortably fixed, I know," he said, rumi-

natively scanning my books, which curiously suggest wealth to every one. "But dash it all, man, you must want more money for something or other — more books, maybe. Everybody wants more something. I know," he ran on, "it isn't every fellah makes up his mind on the dot the way I do. You've got to turn it over in your so-called bean, I suppose. All right. But remember — I don't take no for answer."

"With that trifling limitation, I assume, I have a wide liberty of choice?" I ventured.

"Oh, yes," he grinned. "Outside the fact that you're coming in, you can go as far as you like. Salmon and Byrd!" he exclaimed suddenly. "How's that for a firm name? By gosh! — There's genius in it! May have been that which was driving me to you. I never go wrong. Salmon and Byrd — Gad! It's so good it scares me!"

"Salmon and Byrd," I repeated after him mechanically. "The *menu* strikes me as incomplete for a *viveur* like you. Add a little shrimp salad — or at least an artichoke."

He grinned but he would none of my flippancy.

"No, no," he wagged his head. "None of that. Don't spoil a fine thing. It's — what do they call it — sacrilege. A good firm name — it's half the battle. By George! This has been a day's work for me. I didn't know it was going to be so rich. We ought to have a dinner on it at the Knickerbocker — or Claridge's. What d'you say?"

In a flash I saw the vista of Fred's life spread out before me — noise and laughter, ventripotent bouts with costly dishes in expensive places, tinkling glasses — the world of money-making which consists as much in riotous expenditure as in half-jocund half-fanatical getting. It was to this world that Fred was inviting me.

"There will be supper at six o'clock, if you care to stay," I suggested mildly.

"No-no, thanks," said Fred reflectively. "I'd like to. But somehow not to-night. I couldn't. Better come along with me. And we'll work out details."

I resisted his urging, however, and he left me with this Parthian arrow:

"Think it over as much as you like, Randolph, my boy. But it's a go. Nothing you can say against it will hold a candle to the reasons in favor. The firm name alone is worth a hundred thousand dollars. Consider it settled. Never felt so sure of anything in all my life. So long, my boy. You'll hear from me."

He did not even turn his head when he heard my burst of almost hysterical laughter as he was closing the door. Always heretofore I had counted myself, how humble and insignificant soever, as of the priesthood in the temple of fine things. It was abasing to think that Fred had claimed me for the money-changers.

Never again do I wish to experience the martyred minutes of anguish that I have passed through during the last twenty-four hours.

For some reason that none can explain Jimmie suddenly came down with a fever. That bright little whorl of life all at once looked white, refused his food with the pallid pitiful smile of an octogenarian and, in a twinkling it seemed, his cheeks were burning, his eyes glittered dryly and his lips were parched. Called to his bedside, I leaned over him and the air about me seemed to darken. Laura's child was, I believed, dangerously ill. The heart within me turned leaden and even Griselda displayed alarm. Then and there I vowed inwardly that no strangers should have the care of this child if he recovered, so long as I could care for him myself.

The nearest doctor, who occupies a ground-floor apartment below, a brute of a man of thirty-five or so, elected, when he came up, to look wise and inscrutable. Calm and grave, he prescribed oil and with a murmured, "We shall see in the morning" he left me in an agony of doubt and anxiety.

The only person who exhibited any degree of calm was Alicia. And though she is still a child herself I confess to a feeling of resentment against what seemed to me callousness in the face of our perturbation. I saw visions of any number of diseases, of being quarantined, of Jimmie's possible death, of my bearing forevermore a feeling of nameless guilt before Laura's memory. I told them I should sit up the night.

"Oh, no, Mr. Byrd," insisted the girl with sudden vehemence. "Don't do that. I'll make up a place in the dining room and leave the door of their room open. I'll hear him if he wakes."

"I'm afraid, Alicia, you don't take this seriously enough," I told her sternly. She looked at me wistfully for a moment and then faintly smiled.

"Yes, sir, I do," she answered. "But it's no use our all wearing ourselves out at once if it's real sickness. But I don't think it's anything much."

"How can you know?" I demanded suspiciously.

"I just think so," she asserted. "At the Home children were always coming down like this. The next day they were as well as ever again."

"But this is not the Home," I retorted severely. The girl flushed. I saw I had hurt her.

"But he's a child," she insisted doggedly, in a low voice. I shook my head.

"I shall sit up in the study," I told her, "with the door open. I shall hear him if he calls. You'd better go to bed."

Her great haunting eyes looked at me for an instant and she left me. In the study I lighted a fire, drew up the large chair, lighted a cigarette and in dressing gown and slippers composed myself for the night, determined to spend it waking.

In my mind were revolving many things. Fred Salmon's absurd proposal, the strange trick of circumstances that had suddenly made me responsible for a houseful of children, the whereabouts of Dibdin, the amazing multiplicity of bills, the little lad's burning fever. Drowsiness began to assault my eyelids before the glowing fire. To combat it, I took down that sonata in words, Conrad's "The Nigger of the Narcissus", and reread the description of the Cape storm, which is not a description so much as the expression of the storm itself. As always in reading that book, I was overawed to the point of pain by what language can do. And pondering upon that, I allowed myself to doze off for a few seconds. Suddenly I awoke with a tremor and looked at my watch. To my amazement it was half-past six in the morning.

Abjectly guilty, I stole out and tiptoed into the dining room. The light was burning. I saw three chairs with a crumpled pillow upon them and Alicia, smiling drowsily, was gliding out of the children's room.

"How is he now?" I asked in a muffled tone, thinking basely to give her the idea that I had watched the night through.

"Sleeping quietly," was the reply. "His fever is mostly gone."

"That's splendid," I murmured sheepishly. "You are up — er — early, aren't you?"

"I just lay here on these chairs," she answered quietly. "I looked in at Jimmie about every half hour. He had a very good night." With a sharp pang of annoyance mingled with relief, I felt myself stark and unmasked.

We gazed at each other in silence for a moment, and then I broke into muffled laughter, in which she softly joined. And though I felt myself a fool, I vow I could have hugged that child to my heart of hearts for her sense of humor no less than for her silent unfailing constancy.

Like sunlight after storm, Jimmie's recovery is making the apartment ring again, and when it rings too much I close my door.

I close my door, but not upon the bills. These keep pouring in with the insistent buzzing of a swarm of hornets, and every day I see them with a more helpless dismay. I figure and I add and I calculate, but I seem unable to subtract. I cannot see how we could do without the things that are bought. Already my modest current account is near the point of exhaustion and nothing can possibly come in before April.

To-day, in my perplexity, I took an elevated train and journeyed southward into the region of money. What I should do there I hardly knew, but a nameless inner necessity seemed to be driving me to do something. I had a vague notion of consulting with Carmichael. But when I came into lower Broadway and was actually at Carmichael's door, I fled in disgust with myself for the sufficiently transparent reason that I really had nothing to say to him. I felt like a débutant pickpocket who turns back abruptly from the threshold of his calling because he realizes the absence of a vocation or is overcome by cowardice.

In the street I looked upon the driving masses of people, swarming, streaming, with strained faces, urged on by invisible whips of need, of desire, driven like the souls in Dante's hell by demoniac powers who ever cry, "Pay your way! pay your way!" They did not hear the cry now, the continual snapping of the infernal whips, but

I heard them and I quaked inwardly. To myself I fancied the most of these surging figures upon a level of life that has few problems, that is always "happy" with the dull unexultant happiness of the slave or the captive, coming briskly to the office of a morning with a sort of tarnished metallic gayety, lunching at Childs' or at a counter unprovided with stools, clinging to a strap in a car jammed with their kind, visiting a motion-picture "palace" in the evening and living within their incomes because they must. And though all the rest was abhorrent, that last detail made me envy them.

Pay your way! Pay your way! The cry was beating in my pulses as I came away, droning in the car wheels as I traveled northward, dully insistent in the very noises of the streets about me.

Once within my own door the warmth enveloped me like summer air and with the warmth came the joyous laughter of the children playing in the dining room. In a bubbling of happy turbulence they came rushing toward me as I looked in upon them, demanding that I judge between them on the rules of their game.

"Just because she's a girl," complained Randolph loudly, indicating Laura, "she always wants to be queen."

"It isn't because I'm a girl," broke in Laura, panting. "It's because it's fair. Boys never want to be fair, Uncle Ranny, that's what's the matter. He's been king for half an hour and he always wants us to do impossible things so he can be king forever."

"And I want to be king, too," loudly proclaimed Jimmie.

I suppressed the nascent revolt as best I could and soothed the passions of pretenders. I reminded them that this was a democracy and that royalty in our land could count only upon a visitor's welcome.

"Aw, don't I know?" said Randolph fiercely. "I wouldn't be really truly king for anything."

It was a pleasure to me to enter from the turmoil of the outer world to this playing fountain of affectionate young life. Jimmie, Laura, Randolph, little glimmers of spark-like personality were fitfully flickering over their childish heads and it was my task to turn them into steady flames. That was what I owed to my sister Laura and that was the course upon which I was irrevocably embarked. But now, alone in my study, I still hear in the hum and rumor of the streets the insistent imperative cry, Pay your way! Pay your way!

CHAPTER VIII

THE incredible has happened. No, not the incredible. The incredible is always happening. It is the impossible that has taken place.

I, Randolph Byrd, am now a business man — no priest of the temple, but a brazen money-changer as ever was.

The hum and the noise and rattle of it are perpetually in my ears like the whirr of machinery in the brain of the factory hand. I cannot think or put myself in the moods of thought. The sound of the ticker is constantly in my head, and my nerves crave movement.

Fred Salmon has accomplished his will.

"You must stir it and stump it and blow your own trumpet," is his motto, and he is teaching me to blow. The firm of Salmon and Byrd is an actuality and clownishly Fred is making the most of the humor of the name and doing his best to make me abet him. I say Fred has accomplished it all. But at the bottom it is Laura's children who are innocently the primal cause of my debâcle.

"D'you know what you are?" Fred shot at me to-day in a flash of inspiration — he is dowered with a fecundity of flashes these days. "You are the original Old Man Who Lived in a Shoe! It's the kids that made you get into the game. Gosh! I wish we could get that fact on our letterhead!"

With Fred to think of an idiotic notion is to utter and commit it. And I live in constant dread lest some of our customers and clients, a sporadic body as yet,

should inquire as to the children with which I know not what to do. Fred is an Elizabethan. In the spacious days he would have ruffed and strutted and wenched and taken chances with careless slashing humor among the best or the worst of them. He is a buccaneer who can throw the dice with jovial laughter when things loom blackest under the very guns of disaster. He is an enigma. He is, in short, my exact opposite.

Yet he has made me his partner and accomplice. I used to think myself adamant, but in his hands I am clay.

It is now late in March. The cold blasts are often succeeded by genial days of brilliant sunshine that already promise the birth of a new spring. How much I should delight in the flower market near the Laurentian or in walking up the hill toward Fiesole past the fairy-like Florentine villas, or strolling in the Lungarno and across the Ponte Vecchio to San Miniato — to the Pitti — the Uffizi — the gentle air of Fra Angelico's cloisters — what absurd fancies! . . . I am in wintry New York, yoked to a broker, or as the letterhead styles us — Investment Bankers. And though we have received no cables as yet, we are equipped with a fascinating code cable address, which is "Sambyrd!" There is no end to our grandeur.

Sambyrd! How it all came about is still swathed in a sort of semi-transparent mystery for me — semi-transparent, for even now I do see one thing clearly: My income was hopelessly inadequate to the rearing of three children and my capital was already invaded. With the capital gone what was there left for me but addressing envelopes, the children in a Home like that which Alicia came from and general collapse and catastrophe!

And then there was Fred's enthusiasm.

"Money," said he sententiously, "is a very simple

matter. It won't come rolling to you of its own accord, but you *can* get it. Every one must find his own way. This is my way — Salmon and Byrd. Will you join me and make it your way, too?"

And I, struggling like a fish in a net, like a bird in a snare, like any beast caught in a trap, could discern no way of my own.

"But what," I demanded in a sort of despairing indignation, "can I do at that business?"

"You can learn," said Fred. "And you'll be making something before you know it. And as we grow you'll make more."

And then I made the startling discovery that there are no parallels in life. Writers may babble of types and statisticians of means and averages and populations of facts, but I realized with pain that with all my books I knew of no guide or inspiration. The case of every blessed one of us is unique. I could think of no one in precisely my own circumstances. A pathetic, dejected melancholy overcame me at my fatal tardiness in learning that the world, like a hungry beast, was clamoring for decisions. "Decide! Decide! Decide!" it seems to roar with slavering jaws, "or I devour you! And if you don't decide I shall still devour you." The drifters perish without a struggle. I had drifted heretofore but now I must flagellate the will for a choice.

And so I yielded.

The half of my capital has already gone into our offices, and if chairs, desks and tables will make for success we shall both be millionaires. There are magnificent leather sofas such as I never dreamed of lolling on, but discussions and transactions of money, it seems, must be done within walls padded with luxury. Money breeds money, Fred is ever telling me, and even as bees are attracted by honey, so the opulent investors will flock

to our richly fitted hive. The droning of the ticker and the sound of a typewriter are the only noises permissible, and the smoke of cigars must be the most fragrant.

I hardly know why I should be ironic. Never before have I derived so much amusement in a short space of time. There was the entrance of our first customer, Signor Visconti. He came, this enterprising Milanese, in response to one of the hundreds of individual circular letters we sent out to small banks and investors, on magnificent stationery, announcing our rare bargains in securities so safe that the rock of Gibraltar was pasteboard by comparison, so gilt-edged that only the best of government paper could dare to crackle in their presence; so remunerative that — anyway, Mr. Visconti, admirably dressed, came in.

The young woman who brought in his name had been drilled not to seem flustered. Fred flushed purple with pleasure and executed a brief but exquisite war dance on the rug.

"Tell him I shall see him directly," he murmured to the young woman and sprawled on the leather chair beside me in his triumph.

"Why don't you see him then?" I could not help asking.

"Wouldn't do," Fred wagged his head mysteriously. "Must keep him waiting at least a minute or two — though I'm burning up to get my talons into him."

I laughed at him.

"Now this is what you do, my boy," Fred gave me quick instruction in the hushed voice of a conspirator. "A minute or so after I leave you, you take your hat and coat and pass through the room where I'm talking to him. I won't notice you. When you're nearly at the door, I'll call you back. You'll be in a hurry, but you'll come back. I'll introduce you to Mr. Visconti, then I'll

say confidential-like, but loud enough for him to hear, 'You going out about those bonds?' 'Yes,' you answer, 'but I'll be back soon.' 'While you're about it,' I'll say, 'you can tell Spifkins we can let him have that two-hundred thousand on call at four and three quarters.' You just nod quickly, like a busy man, salute Mr. Visconti and out you go."

"Where — do I go?" I stammered in a daze.

"You go to a telephone booth downstairs in the lobby and you call me up on the wire. And don't be surprised at anything I say until I hang up. Then you can walk round the block and come back. Is that clear?"

"Clear as an asphalt pavement," I answered in my bewilderment.

"That's all right then," he grinned and left me.

Complying with his absurd charge, nevertheless, I was duly introduced to the well-dressed, well-fed, deep-hued Italian banker from Macdougal Street and made my way to the telephone booth in the lobby of the building below. And this is what I heard in Fred's most suave and ingratiating tone.

"Oh, not at all, Mr. Ferris — always glad to hear from a customer. Ah — yes, Mr. Ferris. We can still let you have those bonds. Though in reality they are sold to another client. But I think we can give him something just as good that will suit him equally well. Yes, that will be all right. A hundred thousand, wasn't it? Well, well — ha! ha! Better late than never. Don't let that bother you. Yes, yes, Mr. Ferris. Send them over to your office as soon as my partner comes back. I am a little busy now with a customer. Oh, don't mention it, don't mention it! Eh? Why, yes — thanks. At the Waldorf about five, then. Ta-ta." And he hung up the receiver.

For a moment I stood speechless in the steaming

booth with the telephone receiver in my hands and then I staggered out, shaken by helpless laughter.

When I returned, Visconti, smiling broadly, was in the process of being ushered out by Fred with warm exchanges of amiabilities. We all shook hands on the threshold in a cordial flurry of busy enthusiasm and a moment later Fred and I were alone.

"Just sold that fine peach of a Guinea ten thousand dollars' worth of Hesperus Power bonds," chuckled Fred in irrepressible glee.

"But where," I demanded, "did you get the bonds to sell?"

"Haven't got them yet," he paced the room in nervous jubilation. "But we'll get them in a jiffy — at the National City Bank. They've got lots of 'em over there."

Something dark and heavy and cold seemed to have dropped inside of me upon the vital parts, and chilled me for an instant.

"So this is this kind of a business?" I muttered.

"This is the way this kind of a business begins," he replied composedly.

That interlude of actual business after the ferocious activity of renting, equipping and furnishing an office, getting stationery printed and engraved, installing a ticker, making that mysterious body of connections that was Fred's province, was sufficiently exhilarating to make me accept it without much scrutiny. After all, what could I do? This was the furrow in which my plow was set and this, I suppose, is the custom of the country.

"How," I could not help wonderingly asking, "did you land the effulgent Visconti?"

"Oh, he's a good scout," explained Fred. "He runs a banking house for his fellow dagoes in Macdougal Street. He saw we were new and he likes to give young fellows a chance. He was quite frank. You see, it's

nothing for the big houses to sell ten bonds or so. But he knows that to us just opening up it means a lot more than the commission. It means a Sale. Oh, he's a sport, all right."

"That surprises me more than I can say," I told him.

"There are some good-hearted brutes even in this business," growled Fred, "and don't you forget it."

"Do you think," I asked with a twinge of shame, "he saw through your telephoning business and that rigmarole of yours to me in the booth?"

"Damn if I don't think he did!" roared Fred. "But never mind. He's a sport. And some day, when we're big guns, we'll show him that we appreciate his hand-out by putting him on to something good — see if we don't!"

I felt as shamefaced as though we had committed a felony. Yet I suppose that this is the ordinary comparatively innocent chicane of even honest business, remnants of oriental chaffering and huckstering that still survive. I am hoping we shall grow out of it. Though at times I suspect a certain flamboyancy of temperament in Fred that makes him resort to such shifts rather than not.

A man who had purchased some bonds called up and inquired whether we would take them back. There was no reason for Fred's offering anything but an endeavor to dispose of them. But instead his grandiose reply was:

"Why, certainly we shall take those bonds back, Mr. Smith — and as many more of them as you've got. Yes, bring them down by all means."

Once he had hung up the receiver he turned toward me with blank dismay, muttering:

"Now what the hell shall we do with those things?"

I own to a flash of genuine anger at his imbecile untruthfulness.

"You don't know what to do?" I spluttered. "Then

why on earth did you speak as though you had a dozen buyers waiting in a row?"

"Because that's business," he tried to shout me down. "That devil will have more confidence in us if we let him go back on his bargain than if he made a lot of money on it. Don't you know human nature?"

"Not human nature like that," I retorted bitterly. "Tell me what you are going to do about it."

"Let's get on the telephone, both of us," he spoke cheerfully, "and each call up as many people as we can and offer them those bonds before that weak sister gets here."

"A desperate remedy," I growled irritably. "Let me see you do it."

Fred lighted a cigar and gazed out of the window. When he turned his face was suave and benignant. He looked like nothing so much as a man about to fill a row of Christmas stockings. Then he betook himself to the telephone. In a cheerful, friendly, lingering voice he began to offer his gift to one after another of his list as though an inward and spiritual grace were moving him irresistibly to benefaction. His face was on a broad grin even under a series of repeated refusals, and I confess to experiencing a sort of truculent joy at what I believed to be his discomfiture. His accents, however, never lost their velvety quality nor did he betray by a single note any trace of disappointment. On the contrary he was warming to his work with a keen gusto. On a sudden the young woman at the telephone outside informed him that he was being called. He listened.

"Mr. Smith?" he answered mildly. "Hello! Bringing us those bonds? What? Decided to keep them, after all? Well, well," with a laugh, "the Lord be with you then, Mr. Smith. We could have sold them ten times over since you first called me. No, no. It doesn't

matter. I'll find something else for the others. You're mighty wise, Mr. Smith — I'll hand that to you. No, it's all right. Come and see us. Good-by — good-by, sir!"

When he turned away from the telephone the perspiration beaded his forehead and puffy cheeks and he grinned genially.

"Whew," he whistled, passing a handkerchief over his face. "That was great fun. But why do they want to break in on the innocent morning with things like that! Well, that's how it is, Randolph, my boy," he added lightly and turned away to other things. In his way Fred compels my admiration. For this is only one instance of many, one thread in the texture of our daily life. How I long to read a few pages of "Urn Burial" in order to forget it all!

It is too soon to know whether or not we are a success. But we are each of us drawing a small salary and to me that is an immediate help.

What a curious jumble is our life! Forces strange and awe-inspiring, the very stars in their courses seem to be defending Laura's children, lest I should do them an injury. But in order to keep them and rear them I must resort to a kind of olla-podrida of backstairs shifts and devices, such as I have described, that make my cheek burn. But I suppose it is as Dibdin says: We are all the ministers and retinue, be it in court dress or in tinsel and livery, of that exalted prince of the world, the child. For me, however, it is still a struggle to grasp that ineluctable truth. Perhaps as a reward for this, as a sort of pourboire of Fate, I shall become gruesomely rich, a kind of Mæcenas, an orgulous figure among scholars, and finance some new Tudor or early English texts or latter-day collections of the classics?

My pipe has gone out. I have taken to puffing a pipe

in a manner that would delight the soul of Dibdin. Dibdin! Every day I expect to hear from him, but still my expectation is vain. The children are all abed and I sit here filled with a sense that I am responsible for all of them, sleeping and waking, for their nourishment and existence, for all this machinery that keeps the six of us going, and the thought fills me with awe — and yet there is a kind of pleasant sense of pride in it, too. Dibdin would say that I reminded him of a broody hen, and Dibdin would be right. A broody hen is a model of responsibility for all mankind.

Yet though I cannot look with young-eyed confidence upon all of this, or upon my enterprise with Fred, I can hardly resist a feeling that something of the youth and manhood I have spent as a solitary among books, something stirring and effervescent that I have suppressed, is struggling for an outlet. Fred's methods of business, though I wince at some of them, fill me with gusts of irresistible laughter. His constant horseplay and good humor are infectious.

To-day he came to me with a grave countenance and informed me that Sampson and Company, a house from which we sometimes buy a few bonds, desired to know whether we would join them in underwriting the Roumanian loan.

"And what did you say?" I inquired with equal gravity.

"Naturally I told him I must consult my partner."

"What did they say to that?"

"'Oh, sure,' he said, 'but it isn't a large loan — only fifteen millions. All we want you to take is about three millions.'"

I looked at him quizzically.

"Well, what d'you say, partner, shall we take it?"

I scrutinized his baffling expression and roared with

laughter. He joined me, laughing, until the tears trickled down his cheeks.

"But look here," he began, the flamboyancy of his manner persisting even in private, "three millions isn't so much — and the profit would be large."

So long as it was horseplay I enjoyed the joke. But with Fred the barrier between jest and earnest is very thin, often indistinguishable.

"Don't talk rot," I told him. "Do you want a short cut to bankruptcy?"

"Well, it would be in a great cause," he grinned. "Got to help dear old Roumania!" And humming a musical-comedy tune, he left me. But I am still conscious of a dread lest Fred, in some moment of irresistible magnificence, should commit poor little Salmon and Byrd to the devil or the deep.

CHAPTER IX

To-day is a red-letter day for me. The red letter came from Dibdin. As a matter of fact his brief scrawl in the peculiar, heavy, unadorned script which I love is written on the minutely ruled paper and in the violet ink of the Hotel de France at Papeete. But it was so delightfully cheering to see his dear old fist again — almost like seeing the man himself. The sheet is dated more than two months ago, and postmarked San Francisco six days ago. I wonder what brute intrusted with mailing it has carried it about in his pocket.

Without a word of preamble it begins in Dibdin's abrupt manner.

" I've got you on my mind. How are the kids prospering — and you, old bookworm? I've picked up something for you even out here — a first edition of Balzac's ' Père Goriot ', somewhat fly-blown and the worse for wear, but intact all the same. I won't intrust it to the mails. I'll bring it to you.

" I am enclosing a check for a thousand dollars. Now don't be an idiot, however difficult that may prove. I know all you can say, and believe me it isn't worth a damn. Use it in some way for the kids and make me feel happy out here among the wrecks and loafers of white humanity. I wish you could come out here some day and see to what creatures that once were white men will stoop just to avoid a little work. However, that's by the way. I count on you to do as I ask or you'll make me sore.

"The blessed old tub I came out in sails for Suva in three days. And from Suva I go to the Marquesas. You'll hear from me again before long. If you want to take a chance and write me, the Hotel de France, Papeete, is still the best address I can offer you. Yours, Dibdin."

That was all — after months of waiting. I wish the old fellow enjoyed writing letters a little more than he seems to. Nevertheless I was delighted. The irrepressible tramp! He speaks of the Marquesas as if they were around the corner.

As to his check, my first impulse was to destroy it immediately. I shall keep it, however, as a memento of Dibdin's absurd generosity of spirit. It would have to be some desperate need that would ever compel me to use it. Dibdin little dreams of Salmon and Byrd.

I called in the children to show them the letter. And though they were less excited about it than I was, they seemed delighted at the fact that after a day in the office I should appear gay and cheerful instead of weary and careworn. Care is the badge of incomplete lives. And what I needed was a letter from Dibdin.

A breath of the wide world has come to me with that pleasant burly note, of other-worldiness, of freedom, of rovings and wanderings, something of the zest I used to feel. I used to feel myself (or so I think) strung like a lute, sensitive to every breath and sign of beauty, to all the subtle tunes of life. My nerves are duller now, responsive only to the obvious. In the inverted world of business I suppose that is progress. Dibdin's letter has brought back something of my old self, at least a nostalgia of other days.

And here my conscience smites me. It is long since I have seen Gertrude. I must rectify that omission at once. After all, Gertrude has been patience itself with

my vagaries. And the thought of the old freedom is struck through with the years of her friendship. Gertrude never interfered.

I have seen Gertrude and she was indulgently amiable when I read her Dibdin's letter.

"I believe, Ranny," she was pleased to say, "you are developing. Do you know, I think business experience very good for you?" It was very agreeable to see Gertrude curled up on a sofa in a very pretty tea gown comfortably smoking her cigarette. I felt suddenly that the neglect of feminine society is a mistake for any man, most of all for myself.

"I'm glad my partner isn't here," I told her. "He might give me away."

"I don't care," she answered. "You are a stronger man to-day than you were a few months and even a few weeks ago. Here you are attracting money. A thousand dollars is always a thousand dollars."

"Yes, indeed! Let Morgan look to his laurels," I replied. "His days are numbered."

"Don't be absurd," she laughed. "You'll be rich before you know it. But that isn't the point. Lots of other things you'll see in a new way. You've been a sentimentalist, Ranny," she went on explaining. "Business gives a man judgment instead of sentimentality. You'll come to understand that my advice to you in a number of things, including the children, had more sense to it then you guessed. You will recognize that even children can be cared for better by efficient people trained for it than by an inexperienced bachelor and a little foundling girl. Don't worry about that now," she added hastily, "but you'll find out."

My answering grin must have been of a sickly pallid hue, for I own I felt myself chilling at her words.

"I thought," I put in, "that that was all over and settled between us."

"So it is, Ranny dear," she answered quickly. "Don't misunderstand. I am not advising now. I am merely prophesying."

"Oh, in that case," I endeavored to be conciliatory, "it will be a pleasant game to watch how true your prophecy comes."

"Yes," she spoke more eagerly. "Now tell me about your business. It must be horribly interesting."

"It horribly is," I agreed, "and fearfully done." And I went on to describe to her amusement some of the ways and means of the ingenious Fred Salmon.

"How delightful," was her laughing comment. "Do you know, Ranny, when we're married I mean to come down to your office quite often?"

"Better come now," I suggested. "Who knows — whether there'll be an office by then?"

"Oh, it isn't so long to wait — perhaps in — June — or when you take your holiday."

"The sooner the better," I told her quite sincerely. "I see no object in any further delay — " whereat Gertrude seemed pleased.

"Oh, I'll spring it on you one of these days," she smiled gayly. "Now will you have some tea or something to drink?"

A very companionable person is Gertrude. Since, as a great man has said, a grand passion is as rare as a grand opera, I presume that notwithstanding novelists and romancers to the contrary, companionship is what virtually all successful marriages are based on. One thing my business experience has taught me thus far is a disgust with vague and indefinite conditions. The sooner Gertrude and I are married, the better I shall like it.

Barely had I written down the last words above than something occurred to give them the lie. I am still shaken with anger at what I have learned.

Alicia, whom I had thought to be in bed, rapped gently on my door and came in, her sweet candid face so charged with pain and alarm that I jumped from my chair at sight of her. I have seemed scarcely to notice her these months, yet I realize she has grown as dear to me as any of the other children. To see her suffering seemed poignantly intolerable.

"What on earth," I gasped, "is the matter, Alicia?" She could scarcely speak for the tears that were choking her. "Is it any of the children?"

"N-no, sir," she sobbed. "They — are — all right."

"What on earth can it be then?" I demanded, putting my arm about this little Niobe and gently seating her in the big chair. "Come, my dear, tell me about it." She made an effort to control her sobs.

"You are — going to — send me away," she wept. The same old story. That, I thought, must be this child's obsession.

"Am I?" I spoke as gently as I knew how, taking her little cold hand in mine, "and why am I going to do that?"

"I don't know," she sobbed bitterly. "I suppose because I am no use here — because you don't want me." I laughed at her boisterously in an endeavor to shake her out of that notion.

"And who," I asked, "has said anything of the kind?" She did not answer. "Was it Griselda?"

"No, sir," she breathed.

"Was it any of the children?"

"Oh, no, Uncle Ranny — I mean Mr. Byrd. They like me."

"What was it then?" I insisted gayly. "Come, out

with it. I never heard such bosh. Come, tell me the whole story, Alicia."

"I — I was in the square this afternoon," she began, drying her eyes with a very wet and crumpled little handkerchief, "playing with Jimmie while Laura and Ranny were roller-skating — " and she paused.

"Yes, yes," I urged, "and then?"

"A lady stopped to talk to me — it was Miss — Miss Bayard."

"Miss Bayard?" I repeated wonderingly. It was strange Gertrude had not mentioned it. She must, I thought, have forgotten the incident. "And what," I prompted, "did Miss Bayard say?"

"She said," and Alicia's lips quivered pitifully, "'are you still here, child?'"

"Yes — go on!" I could hardly trust myself to speak for the premonitory anger that was rising within me.

"I told her, yes, ma'am." Alicia spoke somewhat more easily, feeling, evidently, that I was not against her. "And Miss Bayard said," she went on, "that she thought I had gone away weeks ago. I didn't understand what she meant, and I asked her where she thought I had gone. 'Didn't anybody from the Home come to look you up?' she asked me. And I told her that Miss Smith had come. And she asked me whether Miss Smith hadn't done anything about me. And I told her that Miss Smith had — that she said I could stay."

"And what did she say to that?" I gasped, by this time livid with anger.

"She said it was very strange — that she did not understand it. She didn't say it to me. She seemed to be speaking to herself. And then she just gave a little nod and walked away."

"Just gave a little nod and walked away," I repeated

after her mechanically. "And because of that you thought I was planning to send you away?"

"Yes, Mr. Byrd," she murmured with a dejection that in the young is so profoundly touching it makes one's heart ache.

"Well," and I hope my sickly laugh was as reassuring as it was meant to be, "and if I tell you that I knew nothing at all about it — will that make you feel better?" She nodded. "And if I tell you that so far from planning to send you away, I couldn't do without you; that you are necessary in this house, that you are just the same to me as any of the other children; that I make no distinction between you; that, in short — this house is your home until — until you grow up and get married — as long as you want to be here —" and I sat on the side of the chair, drew her to me and patted her as I might have patted little Laura. "Is that all right?"

"Yes, Uncle — Mr. Ranny," she whispered, her head sinking toward me like a child's, and a sigh of deep content escaped her. "I don't want anything else in this world!"

How beautifully affection sits upon a child!

"Now go to bed, Alicia," I urged her gently, "and don't bother your innocent little head about anything of that sort. Miss Bayard was probably joking, but — she won't do that again — when she knows how badly it made you feel."

She stirred as from a trance and slowly rose. "How is the school work going?" I asked her. "All right?"

"Yes, Mr. Byrd," she murmured, "except the Latin — I don't put in enough time on it, the teacher says, especially the Latin composition."

"Ah, we'll have to remedy that. You must come and let me help you. What are you reading in Latin?"

"Cæsar's Commentaries," she smiled shamefacedly,

like a troubled child that has been restored to happiness.

"Ah, then you *must* get it right. For what would happen, Alicia, if you were to face the world ignorant of how Cæsar conquered the Belgians! And if you should go out into life without an intimate knowledge of the equipment of Cæsar's light-armed infantry, of the habits of the Gauls and the right use of the catapult or the proper employment of the chariot, the consequences might be little short of ignominious! Better come to me and let me set you straight. I know you understand indirect discourse from the way you told me your story to-night. But the subjunctive, my dear — ah, the subjunctive must be closer to you than a brother and nearer than hands and feet!"

She laughed a merry, delicious peal of laughter and when she said good night I put my hand upon her soft silken hair and sent from the room a very radiant, happy little girl.

But now, as my thought wanders back to Gertrude's surprising *démarche,* uncontrollable indignation again possesses me. To think that it was she who had instigated the visit of that little inspectress, Miss Smith, weeks ago! It is unbelievable. Underhand methods in Gertrude are new to me.

I have called up Gertrude on the telephone. And in spite of the lateness of the hour she insisted in a somewhat wintry voice that I had better come up at once and see her, as she put it, settle it once for all. *Je m'y rend.* To settle it once for all is precisely what I desire.

My desire has been stormily satisfied. Though inwardly indignant, I returned to Gertrude with every intention of being very bland and very reasonable, hoping against hope to have the unlovely fact somehow cleared

away. But Gertrude, it seems, had decided that the indignation properly belonged to her.

"Hello, Ranny," she greeted me easily, in the gray tone that precedes a tempest. "What do you mean by speaking to me as you did over the telephone?"

"I — I mean this," I faltered, but that was the last time I faltered in speaking to her. "Did you or did you not report the case of Alicia to the Home and send an inspectress to me?"

She watched me with narrowed eyelids for a moment and then, deciding evidently, that a little truculence would reduce me to my normal state of pulp, she answered coolly:

"And suppose I did — what of it?"

"I merely want to know the truth," I answered her quietly enough. "Lies are so detestable to me." She flinched perceptibly, but drew herself up with hauteur.

"Well, then I didn't!" she returned loftily. "But what if I had? Somebody ought to have reported it," she ran on with gathering temper by which she thought to crush me. "I think it's indecent for you to have in the house a girl of that age who's no relation to you. The fact that you are a fool doesn't make it any less indecent. I'm the only woman friend you have and somebody has to see you don't make a worse idiot of yourself than nature made you to start with. Now do you understand, my excellent friend?"

And having discharged this volley she stood panting lividly, as if viewing my ruins. At the moment however I could not consider her. I knew only that flashes of red appeared before my eyes, that I spoke the literal truth when I told her:

"To me such an action and the person guilty of it would be equally contemptible."

"You say that to me?" she gasped, taking a step for-

ward, with a colorable imitation of incredulity, strange in view of her denial.

"To you — yes," I told her, quietly enough, for now I was more master of myself. "And contemptible is only a mild euphemism for what I should really think." She stared at me speechless for a moment.

"*You* think!" she uttered in mocking scorn. "You've posed as a sort of God's fool — but what you are is the devil's tool."

"Take care, Gertrude," I warned her. "You might say something that you will regret even more."

She waved me contemptuously away.

"I'll say this," she returned in level tones, seating herself and clenching her hands in an effort at control — but in reality she was beginning a new offensive. "You'd better go home, Ranny, and make up your mind to send that girl away. All men are rotten. But it's because I thought you were different that — that — " she did not finish, but added: "And to have you gathering in girls from the gutter — "

"Stop!" I cried, "I won't hear another word," and turned away as if to go, not trusting myself to say more.

"Come back!" she called, jumping from the sofa. "Come back and listen: Either you send that girl away or I'll have nothing more to do with you. Is that understood?"

I laughed at her mirthlessly.

"Choose between her and me," she uttered with the touch of melodrama that few women seem to escape.

"Don't be theatrical," I told her, now more in control of myself. "That girl makes it possible for me to bring up Laura's children. She is no more to me than any of the others. But however that may be, she stays — understand that, please, Gertrude: she stays!"

"Then you've chosen?" she demanded in livid stupefaction.

"I've announced no choice. But the girl stays."

"Thank God!" she lifted her hands upwards, and I hope her prayer was acceptable. "I knew I was tied to a fool," she added, as though I had been holding her enchained, "but I did not know he was a knave as well. I'm free at last!"

I walked out without trusting myself to make reply.

I sincerely hope Gertrude will enjoy her freedom more than she did her bondage. Anyway, I am glad she has entered a denial.

As I walked home under a starry sky, however, I was amazed to feel my anger cooling rapidly; the sense of defeat, of disappointment with human nature, giving way to a new feeling of freedom, to an elation I had not experienced in years. I definitely felt a leap of exhilaration in the wake of the other mingled emotions. It took me by surprise.

Matrimony is obviously not for such shameful villains as myself. If Gertrude expects me to return on bended marrow bones and sue for forgiveness, I am certain she is mistaken. Matrimony is not for me. That at least is clear.

CHAPTER X

THE dancing flamboyancy in his veins has proved too much for my revered partner, Fred Salmon.

With a glimmer half bravado, half amusement in his eyes, he announced to me this morning that he has "signed on for a piece of the Roumanian loan."

I was stupefied.

"How much?" I gasped faintly, watching him closely, for I could not believe it.

"Only a measly million," he replied with deprecating cockiness. "It was as much as I could do to make them let us come in at all. If it weren't for your cold feet I would have taken the three millions." And his chuckle irritated me beyond words.

He was in earnest. He was not joking.

"And where the devil," I spluttered, "will you get the money for even the initial payment?"

"Raise it, my boy, raise it," he bent, beetling over me. "If we want to amount to anything we've got to take chances. One syndicate participation like that and perhaps another with the newspaper publicity, and we're made men in the Street. Got to do it. Want to be a piker all your life? I don't!"

"You're — mad —" I stammered limply. "Stark, raving mad. And how do you propose to raise the money?"

"By selling the bonds, fellow!" he announced with aloof superiority.

"Have you got the bonds?"

"No. They are not even in this country. We give them *ad interim* certificates until the bonds arrive."

"Have you got the certificates?"

"No," was the astounding reply. "We'll sell 'em first, get the money for 'em, turn it over to Sampson & Company, the syndicate managers, and draw our certificates. That's how it works. Of course if we were a bigger house, better known, it would be easier. But we'll do it — don't you worry — we'll do it!"

"You mean," I groped, "we have to sell something we haven't even in hand and get money for it?"

"That's what it amounts to," he grinned, though less jauntily than before.

I felt myself crumbling to dust.

"Don't sit there like that!" he cried, regarding me as one looks down from the side of a great liner upon a drifting derelict. "Get busy! Get on the telephone and sell some Roumanian bonds!" And he chuckled in his absurd triumphant manner that will one day drive me to desperation. "Begin with your friend Visconti," he suggested. "He seems to have taken a shine to you. Talk to him in Dago."

Many and many a time had I asked myself what I was doing in that particular galley. To enter a new occupation without enthusiasm, for a cloistered monk like myself to go out into the market place as a chafferer and a huckster, among a race I had not even cared to understand, and to embrace their ideals and their career, concerning which I had not even curiosity, had been difficult enough. With the lash of my need I had whipped myself like a flagellant to the daily grind until custom had given it the ungrateful familiarity that the treadmill must have for the mule.

But to embark upon this murky enterprise of Fred's,

charged for me with the dread of a hundred lurking pitfalls, into which I should infallibly stumble, charged with the fear of certain failure, all my instincts revolted against it. Nevertheless, like a lost soul, I suffered myself to be driven because I must.

It is to the glory of human nature that there is more of the milk and marrow of human kindness in it than pessimists give it credit for. The excellent Visconti, after listening to me in silence while I lamely and guiltily explained my offer to him, courteously replied in Italian.

"If you recommend them, Signor, I will take them. I cannot take many, but I will take five."

I thanked him as best I could, but I shrank back as under a blow. This man was buying not Roumanian bonds so much as my word. Besides, though the bonds were right enough, I had nothing to give him and yet I wanted his money. I could not face it, and so I informed my egregious Fred.

"That's so," said Fred reflectively and for a moment he was lost in thought. Then, as is his wont, he suddenly began to radiate the heat of a new inspiration. "I've got it!" he cried. "Listen here. You've only put half your capital into this business. You've got in the vault — how much is it? Twenty-five thousand in securities?"

I gaped at him in terror.

"Well," he ran on, "suppose you bring them over, deposit them with Sampson and Company against that much in *ad interim* certificates — or else borrow money on 'em. Don't you see?" he slapped his knee gleefully, "then we have those certificates on hand. We can pass 'em right out to fellows like Visconti, who come straight across, and so go on with the game. When we're through, all you've done is to lend yourself — the firm —

twenty-five thousand in securities, given us a big lift and you put your securities back in the vault. Don't you see that?"

"No."

"Isn't that clear?" he asked in an injured tone.

"Clear as pitch," I answered truthfully.

"Never mind," he clapped me smartly on the shoulder. "You go bring your securities over. I'll make it clear. Of course you'll draw interest on the loan you're making the firm."

And like the mule I am, I dully complied. And now we are laboring on with the sale of the million in foreign bonds to people the majority of whom have not a notion whether Roumania is the capital of Rome or a Central American republic. "*L'insuccess,*" declares Balzac, "*nous accuse toujours la puissance de nos pretentions.*" But as I had no pretensions in this business, loss and failure would be doubly humiliating. What then, I ask myself again, am I doing in that galley? Meantime what remains of my slender possessions is hypothecated to the pretensions I had never entertained.

I have been house-hunting in the suburbs. It is idle for me to try to find either a house or an apartment in any region that would be suitable for both my means and the children in New York. So for two Saturdays and two Sundays I have been trudging the dreariness of the less expensive suburbs in quest of a house.

"What!" exclaimed Fred, when he heard of it, "not going to leave the Shoe?"

"Yes," I told him. "The Shoe pinches, I must find another."

"Well, you're a funny old geezer," was his laughing comment. I could do better than that in describing him.

When I come home depressed and weary I find a

shower of little attentions awaiting me, very winning and touchingly agreeable. Little Jimmie, with great serious eyes, ostentatiously brings me my slippers and dressing gown and watches my face intently for the reward of commendation. When I murmur, "Thanks, old man, very good of you," I can virtually see his little pulses pounding with exultation in his veins.

"Are you vewy tired, Uncle Ranny?" he inquires, keeping up the high drama of profound concern.

"So, so, old chap," I tell him, kissing his serious little face. "Nothing to worry about." A moment later I hear him dashing about the dining room very properly and completely oblivious of my fatigue.

Laura in the rôle of Hebe, gravely brings me tea on a small tray, and asks whether there is any book I desire or anything else that she might bring me.

But behind all these attentions I discern the directing hand of Alicia. Can it be that the child has instinctively divined that I have actually broken with Gertrude on her account, that the little woman's soul in her secretly exults in a feeling of victory? Since she cannot know all the conditions, she can feel, at most, I suppose, only a vague primitive sense of triumph in defeating the will of another woman. Perhaps I am attributing too much to her young intelligence, but at times I seem to perceive in her eyes, in her bearing, a touch of the protective instinct, of almost the maternal toward me, that I had never observed in her before. Possibly it is merely a sense of gratitude. At all events, those attentions of the little people are very soothing and grateful, notably now, since Griselda's have declined perforce, in view of her greatly increased work in the kitchen. Yet it staggers me at times when I realize the number of souls for whose shelter and livelihood I am responsible, for the complex machinery that I must keep revolving. Experience like

that should be acquired young. Like Mr. Roosevelt, I would advocate early marriages.

I have found a house.

In Crestlands (thrilling are the names of suburbs!) thirty-five minutes from Grand Central Station, in Westchester County. I came upon a châlet-like cottage built largely upon a rock that I believe will answer our purpose. The rent is moderate and there is said to be an asparagus bed somewhere in the "grounds." I know there are two trees with gnarled roots grasping their way downward among the stones, in a business-like struggle for existence, and there are a few inches of lawn for the children. With a veritable terrain like that as dower, it will surprise no one that I took the cottage.

"The latitude's rather uncertain, and the longitude also is vague," as vague, almost, as that of Roumania; nevertheless I shall be henceforth a dweller of Suburbia.

This being Sunday, I took the children out there in the afternoon to examine their new demesne. With the air of a castellan exhibiting an old castle, I showed them through the rooms and in the phrases of the real-estate dealer I enumerated their advantages — with a heavy heart. But the children cared nothing about that. Randolph saw visions of a tent or an Indian tepee under one of the gnarled old trees and Jimmie illustrated how he would "woll down" the slope; all our "grounds" are slope *et praeterea nihil*. But Laura, detecting a neglected rose bush near one of the windows, clapped her hands for joy.

"This is like the house in 'Peter Pan', Uncle Ranny," she cried delightedly. "There will be roses peeping in, and babies peeping out."

I looked at her in poignant surprise. It was so absolutely the voice of her mother when she was a girl, the

spirit and the expression. It is exactly that feature that my poor sister would have first taken into account; it might have been Laura herself. I turned away in order not to cloud their delight. The poetry of life is the only thing worth living for, yet what a toll the world exacts on that commodity!

Griselda, in spite of all temptation, had declined to come.

"Is there a good kitchen?" she demanded. I told her I thought there was.

"Then I will not waste my time looking for the birdies in the trees or the paint on the roof," she retorted stoutly. She even demurred at Alicia's coming. "There's over much to do," she protested darkly.

Of discomfort and wretchedness let none speak. I have sounded both and so much else that is unpleasant to the abysmal depths that I shall never again look with the same eyes upon the impassive faces of the men in the moving express train. They have all no doubt lived and suffered even as I, these, my brothers!

I have moved the household to my suburb, and this is a lament *de profundis.*

The legendary mandrake is a gurgling infant to the way my books cried upon removing. They not only screamed; they sobbed and quivered like broken souls to be dislodged from their place that has known and loved them so well and so long. Every object in the flat was a whole plantation of mandrakes. Their wailing and ululation resounds yet in their new and changed surroundings. Roses peeping in, indeed! To my books this is a house of sorrow. Forlorn and jumbled and still unsorted they stand and lie in heaps so that their fallen state wrings my lacerated heart. Alicia, to whom I sadly complained of this condition, consolingly answered:

"But my English teacher in school would say that that was a 'pathetic fallacy', Mr. Ranny. Books and things don't really feel, do they?"

"Don't they!" I bitterly exclaimed. "Let unemotional pedants speak as they stupidly will, Alicia. Nothing can be more poignantly pathetic than a fallacy!"

"Yes, sir," murmured Alicia and with reverent fingers she silently helped me to place some of those books. She has a tender touch for the objects of other people's love, a charming attribute in a woman.

And from the physical chaos in the châlet at Crestlands I am whirled madly every morning in a crowded express train, then in a convulsively serried subway car, to the more subtle chaos in the office of Salmon and Byrd — to sell Roumanian bonds. Roumanian bonds are overrunning those offices like the rats in the town of Hamelin. Ah, will not some piper, pied or otherwise, come and pipe them all into the sea? The answer, I grieve to say, is no! The impossibility of shifting one's burdens is the fundamental mistake of Creation.

Nothing irritates me more after a morning's fruitless telephoning or ineffectual running about than to have Fred Salmon smile sleekly, clap me on the back and mumble mechanically:

"Great work, old boy! You're doing fine!"

What is the use of these false inanities? On Saturday he came to me with the gratifying intelligence that Imber and Smith, who took two millions of the bonds, have already sold out their allotment.

"Damn them!" was the only answer I could find.

"That's what I say," he answered in his perfect rôle of being all things to all men, then reflectively, "I think Smith's a liar, though." I'll wager nevertheless that he congratulated Smith as heartily as he bruises my back.

To be all things to all men is surely one of the most disgusting traits in a human biped. Fitfully ever and again I wish myself out of the ruck and rabble of all that. But sadly and heavily it comes to me that it is better perhaps to bear the ills one has than to fly to others that are a mere sinister blank. I seem like a man on a raft with the storm-lashed waves washing over me the while I gasp for breath and hope for rescue.

I wonder what this life would be like if upon coming home to Crestlands there were not those eager little retrievers to fetch and to carry and to wait upon me, to surround me with their glad young freshness. But in candor I must admit that but for them I should be leading my old secluded life, undisturbed among books, that now seems remote as a past incarnation.

The weeks go by and, toiling under our burden, we are desperately trying to stem the rush of time. In certain hard-pressed moments I have a sickly feeling that time will win — and crush us. A revoltingly new discovery I made yesterday, that Fred has taken to drinking during business hours, suddenly drew the life out of me like a suction pump. Then, realizing the meaning and the enormity of the fact, I was frightened out of fear and talked to him in as friendly and kindly a vein as the circumstances would permit, in an effort to show him our position and where it might lead us.

His first snarl of defiance gave way to contrition. He wept maudlin tears and made promises so robust that they ought to outlive him, but — I feel shaken as never before.

Meanwhile Sampson and Company are calling for the payments due on our allotment of bonds, and Fred, the smiler and the diplomat, is shirking interviews with them.

"What we need, Ranny," he said to me to-day in

chastened mood, "is capital, more capital. We went into this business on a shoe string — sometimes it will hold till you can get a rope and sometimes — "

— "Even a life line is too late," I supplied.

He did not answer. But after a pause he began afresh:

"Couldn't you get round and see some of your rich friends — see whether they could tide us over for a spell?"

"Rich friends!" I writhed as one in torment. "Who are my rich friends? I have none, as you ought to know. I have now put in every cent of capital that I own — against your business experience, Fred. And this is where we've arrived. If my sister's children weren't dependent upon me — but then," I ended bitterly, "I shouldn't be here, as I think you know."

He bowed his head.

"Didn't your sister — wasn't there anything — ?" But to his credit, he did not finish. If, as I suppose, he meant to ask whether Laura left any money that I could use, he evidently thought better of it and walked away in a somber silence. And that is where we stand.

That is where we stand in our business, and the needs of my household are expanding. Griselda knows nothing of my affairs and yet I surprise her dark eyes, singularly lustrous for one of her years, watching me at times out of her swarthy wrinkled face, as if divining the Jehannum I am experiencing. More than ever she lays herself out to perform incredible feats of economy, whilst I hypocritically pretend to be unaware of it.

The children, having prospered and grown during the winter, are in need of new summer wardrobes, which I have ordered bought. If it is to be disaster, then shabbiness shall not betray us. Like the man who donned evening clothes in which to sink with the *Titanic*, I have

always entertained a stubborn faith in the policy of good clothes. Policy, policy — the trail of policy is over me like a fetid odor — and how clean and unsmirched I have always felt in my stupid transparency! Gertrude, if she knew it, would now rejoice that she had thrown me over.

I envy our clerks and typists who banish all cares at five in the afternoon and do not resume them until the following morning. What a gay life is theirs — if they but knew it. They jest and fool and hurl picturesque slang at one another and draw their pay on Saturdays, unconscious of how near to perdition we totter. If we go to the wall they will soon find other places. But I — shall find the wall. I wish I knew what the emotions of Fred are as, rucking his forehead heavily, he strides about our rugs. I only know, however, that mine are emotions of doom.

The black doom is upon us.

After days of haggling and lying and shuffling and paltering we have, as a firm, expired.

Our vain and concentrated efforts to sell something that we had not the necessary means and connections to sell led us to neglect the things we could have done.

I shall not soon forget the vile outburst of the heavy-jowled Sampson when as by a Sultan's firman, he imperiously summoned us to his office and told us in his language what he thought of us.

"People like you don't belong in the Street — they belong in jail. Assign!" he snarled, "Better assign at once and clear out!"

And not the least of the bitterness of that moment was the acrid realization that I could not charge him with having flattered and hounded Fred into the vanity of the enterprise, because at that moment Fred and I were one

— with this distinction: What Fred was suffering would roll from his back like water from a rhinoceros, whereas I would remain obscenely branded by his words forevermore.

It was useless to argue, futile to protest. There was no time or place for extenuating circumstances. I was too full of shame and humiliation to offer any conciliatory suggestions, and I still had enough of mulish pride not to truckle to that fish-eyed bully. We walked out of that man's office bankrupts.

I still marvel how I found my way back to our own office through the lurid darkness that encompassed me. The world about me — the palpitating, pressing eager world, of which in a measure I had been a part — was suddenly strange and phantasmal and alien, the ghostly city of a dream. The people were shadows and their hurrying steps and errands as mysterious and as unrelated to my life as those of a colony of ants. The only actuality I did not envisage in that dark moment which was coextensive with eternity, was that *I* was the anemic ghost stalking at noonday and the others were the reality.

"If only you had not taken the balance of my capital — " was the thought throbbing under my overwhelming misery — "if only you had left me that!" But I could not bring myself to whine to Fred. I kept stonily silent. A burning resentment swelled my heart so that I could not speak. The newspaper publicity Fred had craved would come to him now with a vengeance.

Now they are busy dismembering the corpse and colporting the remains, whilst I sit darkly at home in Crestlands like one disembodied, dead.

CHAPTER XI

I HAVE had time to grow dulled to the shabby peripety of my career as a business man. The sickening details and legal forms of our failure are over, and I am wretchedly surviving on the loan made upon an insurance policy, but still I have evolved no plans for the future.

I sit in the shadow of the châlet watching Jimmie rolling down the slope and endeavoring to roll up again. The early August sun is hot in the heavens and the air even of Crestlands is muggy. And my pulses keep insistently repeating, repeating, "What is to become of us?" My pulses — but not my mind. That useless functionary has quite simply suspended operations.

I used to feel wise in reading Montaigne and Buckle, humorous with Rabelais and Cervantes, acute and a man of the world with Balzac or Sainte-Beuve. But none of these erstwhile comforters, it appears, seems able to lift up my spirit. Modern young critics talk of escape in literature, but it seems one can only escape when there is nothing very serious to escape from. Like a debauchee who had killed his palate or one who has swallowed an unwholesome dish overnight, the zestful taste for an essay of Elia, the gustatory rolling under the tongue of sentences in "Religio Medici", the keen pleasure in a Dryden preface, all these are now impossible. The savor of them has died for me. My dreams of Maecenasship for Tudor Texts have gone a-glimmering.

For joy in books the tranquil heart is needed. The world has been too much with me and neither poppy nor mandragora can banish the effects of it. There is no balm to sane me.

There was escape after all, though — if not in reading, then in writing. I can quite understand now the persistence of diarists in the world. I had no sooner written down the words above than a tremor of resolution shook me and I went into the baking city in quest of livelihood. I found nothing save exhaustion, but it is certain that in Crestlands I shall find even less.

I looked upon the teeming streets wide-eyed like a gawk, surprised anew that so many should find a foothold and sustenance where I had failed. The mystery of that will always baffle me. The deepening gloom gave way, however, when I entered Andrews' bookshop. His welcome was warm.

"Stranger," he greeted me cordially, "come into your own."

"I don't deny I have felt it calling," I admitted.

"'Course you did — there is nothing else in the world."

"Ah, how much else, Andrews!" I told him sadly.

Whether he has heard of my failure or not I cannot tell. If he has, he was tact itself.

"Here are some beautiful things for you to see," he announced, bustling as he led me to a table in the rear of the shop. I looked at his beautiful things and was able to give him some useful points about one or two of them. He has actually come upon a Caxton, the lucky devil! This was indeed "my own", as Andrews was shrewd enough to divine. *Ça me connaît.* And his courtesy and his deference were strangely consoling in the light of my recent experiences. Courtesy and defer-

ence cost others so little, but what refreshing manna they are to one's self-respect!

I go on tramping the pavements of New York and I wish there were more point in my trampings.

Every morning I go forth with a faint glow of hope, and the dim basis of my hope, when I come to think it out, is something like this: In the haunts of men I may meet somebody, an old acquaintance who may know or hear of something whereby a broken reed like myself, a pronounced failure, may get the chance of earning a livelihood. A desperate enough situation when reduced to the glaring light of plain speech — but that is the best that I am able to do. If only Dibdin were here! Despairingly I am in need of a friend. But my past life has separated and insulated me, so that when I think of friends and my thought convulsively darts out this way and that, it encounters nothing but vacancy, empty air. Fred Salmon is avoiding the Club. He is the only one who had reached to me from the past, and the result I have already recorded. I am not eager to meet him, though I have worn out any hostility I may have felt toward him. *C'est un mauvais metier que celui de medire.* I find my inward man the better for thinking of Fred neutrally, when I think of him at all.

Illness was the one thing lacking to my ineffable Pilgrim's Progress, so infallibly illness has appeared.

Jimmie came down with measles on Saturday and yesterday Alicia followed his example. The crumpling of Alicia under illness has proved like the shattering of a column in the edifice of my household. The whole insecure structure is tottering. And though she is burning with fever, the unhappy girl is murmuring with anxiety that stockings go unmended and buttons unsewn.

"Don't you worry about that, little girl," I keep telling her. "Griselda will do those things."

"Griselda has too much to do as it is," she gulps and the tears start to her hot eyes. I have isolated her and Jimmie in my room and Randolph and Laura are cautioned to keep as far as possible away from them. I remember the time when I would have flown from the fear of infection as from the plague, but now my anxieties are of a wholly different nature. Jimmie is mending now, but Alicia is far more ill than she knows.

Griselda has undertaken the stockings and at night, when I sit watching and waiting for sounds from either of my invalids, I operate upon the buttons. It is curious how much art enters into the sewing of a button. A dog of a bachelor though I have ever been, I have never been compelled to learn that handicraft before. But I have learned from Griselda, who smiled crookedly when she imparted the law, that if you twist the thread around several times after you have sewn it, the whole thing acquires, relatively, the strength of a cable. To your punctured fingers you attend afterwards.

Alicia, awakening at midnight, sat up in bed and caught me at my task; she moaned most dolefully. I hastily put Jimmie's little "undies" behind me, but too late.

"You'll never want me — or need me again — what's the use of getting well?" she wailed weakly.

"Oh, yes, I shall, Alicia — more than ever," I hastened to assure her.

"You do everything now that I ought to do," she pressed with febrile insistence. "I shall be no use any more."

"But don't you see, Alicia," I argued, touching her hot forehead, "that I shall have to be earning money while you are doing the buttons? I ought to be earn-

ing it now, so get well as quickly as you can. Jimmie sees it; he's much better already." That logic seemed to soothe her more than I had expected. She caught my hand impulsively and pressed it to her cheek. The tremendous part played by affection in the lives of children is a never-ceasing wonder to me.

Alicia is convalescent again, *laus Domini,* and Jimmie is now running about the little house filling it with noise — which is music to my ears. Laura and Randolph have fortunately thus far escaped infection. Jimmie is wanting to resume "wolling up and down" the slope again, but this is still *verboten.*

I can now take up my journeys into town again and I note with a pang that I am growing shabby. The yearly purchases of clothes had been as regular with me as my meals, but I have ordered no clothes for the spring or summer. Odd, what a deleterious effect the shabbiness of clothes has upon one's consciousness! The tinge of inferiority it brings touches some very tender places in one's spirit, almost like a shabby conscience. But the doctor of the neighborhood, a contemplative fellow who obviously knows his business, though he talks of his laboratory and his experiments like an alchemist, has earned the clothes that I must do without. And of the two I needed them more.

My search is ended. There is jubilation in my heart again. I have fallen into a livelihood; like the bricklayer who used to fare forth, dinner pail in hand, I have found work.

And the way of it was an odd little stroke of Fate, a whimsicality that would have pleased the ironic soul of Thomas Hardy.

An old college friend of mine, Minot Blackden, whom

I used to call Leonardo da Vinci because he was so full of ideas and inventions, had rediscovered, he said, the art of glass-staining. After a five years' residence in Italy, on a modest patrimony, most of which had gone into glass or into stain, he had returned to his native land and set up a shop *à la* William Morris somewhere in the region of Bleecker Street, and proceeded to stain glass. He had had some newspaper publicity recently, and there were cuts of his work.

While passing a church in my hot and dusty peregrinations, it occurred to me that here might be a chance of serving him and also myself. By writing an interesting booklet about his craft, illustrating it profusely and sending it with personal letters to all the vestries in the country, I might bring a flood of custom to his shop. It is with this forlorn proposal that I was blundering about to discover Minot Blackden. I failed to find his shop, but I came face to face with my old Salmon and Byrd acquaintance, Signor Visconti.

In his palm beach suit and Panama hat, Visconti made a splendent and impressive figure in the purlieus of Bleecker Street.

"Ah-h, Signor Byrd," he cried with Latin cordiality, seizing my hand in both his own, "you are what you call a sight for sick eyes. I have often wonder about you — you must come into my banca — we must have leetla refreshment!"

Refreshment appealed to me at the moment and gladly I accompanied him to his private office in the bank, that stands between a junk warehouse and a delicatessen emporium. With a charming tact he touched upon the hard luck of Salmon and Byrd and dismissed the subject for good.

Briefly — for him — that is, with a wealth of gesture and illustration, he informed me that he was looking for

a man for his enlarging bank, and asked me to recommend one.

"I want a fina man —" he explained. "American gentleman — who speeks a leetla da Italian — who put up what you call a fina fronta — understand me?"

"A fine front," I mused aloud, "and speaks Italian — no, Signor Visconti, we had no such young man in our office. I can think of no one I could recommend."

He was obviously nonplused.

"I thinka," he said, with a gesture of final resolution, "if I could finda some gentleman lika you, Mr. Byrd, he would be *precisamente* what I look for. I know," he added hastily with an apologetic laugh, "man lika you, Signor, be hard to find!" And again he laughed heartily, though watching me between narrowed eyelids. His drift was now obvious. I was silent for a moment.

"Well, if it comes to that, Signor Visconti," I answered slowly, "I am doing nothing in particular just now. I may be utterly no good for you, but — but if —"

"Ah, you would try old Visconti, Signor!" And up flew his arms like windmills. "You no ashamed to work in vot you Americans call da Guinea colony! — no, no!" He noted the deprecating shadow on my face. "Ah, you understanda — you know the granda history of the Italiana people. You — but, Mr. Byrd —" and with an admirable histrionic transition he suddenly turned grave and sad — "Mr. Byrd, you are the very man I looka for," and he gripped both my hands. "But, Meester Byrd — I fear I cannot afford to pay what you would expect. Ah, *sacra* — if I could! You, the very man — *Dio* —" and he clapped a hand dramatically to his forehead — "the very man, but! —" and his full smile of sad and wistful regret seemed genuine for all its histrionic value.

"What do you propose to pay, Signor Visconti?" I inquired.

"I can only pay to start," he whispered hoarsely, with the round eyes of a man facing the inevitable, "thirty-fiva, maybe forty dollars week. Too leetla, I know," he added slowly, letting his hands fall on his knees with resignation.

"Very well, Signor Visconti," I said. "If you will try me, I shall be glad to come at forty dollars."

Visconti fairly leaped at my hand and the bargain was struck.

I am to begin earning a livelihood on Monday.

Who said that adversity is the best teacher? Possibly it is, but gladness is the ablest cocktail. There is no stimulant like a little success.

I am an august personage.

I shall choke with pride, so august am I become in the Banca e Casa Commerciale Visconti.

I call up the National City Bank concerning the price of bonds, or the rate of exchange, in English so presumably impeccable that Signor Visconti visibly puffs out his magnificent chest as he listens. There is a divinity that shapes our "frontas", rough-hew them how we will.

"Visconti's speaking," I say with firmness and the head of Visconti's curls his fine dyed mustache and turns away, glowing with ill-concealed pleasure. This is seemingly what the head of Visconti's has been waiting for. Mentally I offer a fervent prayer that he may never be disillusioned as to my capacity.

I toil as I have never toiled before. I come early and go late and frequently have my lunch sent in from the adjoining delicatessen, powdered no doubt by the contiguous junk house, and the "boss", as the others call him, smiles with a rare unction that spells approval.

With difficulty we are actually living on my income. If I had the half of my capital back that I had no business to put into Salmon and Byrd — but ifs inaugurate depressing trains of thoughts. My library alone stands between me and disaster, so like a prudent man of business I have begun a catalogue of it and I am training Alicia to help me. I must not again be caught by so desperate a prospect as recently faced me.

How my little household had been affected by my late slough of despond I realize only now that I have passed it. Laughter and high spirits seem to have been uncorked again. We play and we rollic and chatter, more than in the early days of our *vie de famille* — how long ago is it? — something less than a year, no longer!

It is now the end of September and the schools have reopened. We are all sanely and industriously busy, like a normal American family, and as though its so-called head were an adequately competent being, and not the bungling masquerading amateur that he is. "Who never ate in tears his bread" — well, we have made intimate acquaintance of poverty and we fear it less than of yore — though we hate it more. It may be an impostor, but who maintains that all impostors are harmless? I certainly would deny that premise, so — we are cataloguing the library.

"Here is 'The Anatomy of Melancholy' by Burton," announces Alicia, taking down a volume.

"Small quarto, printed at Oxford, 1621," I finish for her.

"Yes," she breathes, marveling wide-eyed. "How can you remember such things, Uncle Ranny?" for so I have asked her to call me.

"How can I remember?" I ask in surprise. "How can I remember that you are Alicia Palmer, close to the

towering age of fifteen, or that Jimmie Pendleton is five?"

"But we — are people," avers Alicia, "and we are — yours." I own to a slight thrill at this sweet investiture, implicit in her words, but I seem obtuse to it.

"But so is a great book a person," I sententiously inform her, "and 'Oxford, 1621', means a first edition, Alicia — not merely a person but a personage. That book is as proud an aristocrat as though it were plastered with coronets and simply throbbing with Norman blood. There is a whole heraldry about it — it is a prince among books. And all, Alicia, because it aroused men's interest and has given them delight from about the time the Pilgrims first landed at Plymouth. It's a book that could take Doctor Johnson out of bed two hours sooner than he wished to rise. Also, if the worst came to the worst, it could feed us for a time, and that is very important, isn't it, Alicia?"

"Yes," she breathes in awe which for some reason delights me. "What a wonderful thing it must be to write a great book." And she fingers the next volume with even greater reverence.

"The 'Life of Edward Malone', by Sir James Prior," reads Alicia. "Is that a prince among books, too?"

"No," I answer. "That is just a friend. Malone, you see, was crossed in love in the days of Doctor Johnson, and by way of consolation became a book-collector and a Shakesperian commentator. They say the Irish are fickle. But here is one who could never love again. So whenever I read his life, I think I see through a sort of mist the lovely lady whom he lost and all about him is curiously dear to me. He wouldn't feed us for very long, Alicia, but he has given me many hours of pleasure."

"Are book-collectors people — crossed in love?" she

inquires with gentle subtlety, and I am surprised that one of her youthfulness should be arrested by that particular point.

"If you mean me," I answer quietly, "then I can tell you that I wasn't. No one ever loved me enough to cross me. I am a collector by a sort of — spontaneous degeneration."

Alicia throws her fine young head back and peals with delicious laughter. Afterwards I catch her smiling to herself as she copies down the titles.

I am amazed to note how lovely that child has become since she has been here. Her thin, frightened expression has given way to one of happy confidence. All too soon she will be enriching some young man's life with happiness. Her interest in my musty old books has given her a value of companionship in my eyes that I trust I shall not exaggerate at the expense of my niece and nephews — though Alicia is hardly one to take advantage of such a situation. Nevertheless, I must be on my guard.

After all, though she is the chartered custodian of the others, and *quis custodiet ipsos* — who shall watch over Alicia? Obviously, it is my task to improve her mind in order to make her the better guardian for them.

And Alicia's mind is improving apace.

"Uncle Ranny," she inquired the other day, "may I ask what that first edition of Boswell's 'Johnson', cost you?"

"It costs me nothing but a sleepless hour now and then," I told her. "It is not paid for. But I owe Andrews four hundred dollars for it. God knows when I shall pay it. But why do you ask, Alicia?"

"I have just read in *Book Prices Current* that a copy was sold by Sotheby's in London for one hundred pounds."

"Already!" I murmured and I was lost in admira-

tion not of the accretion in value — I am used to that — but of the girl's facility in acquiring the interest and the jargon of my hobby.

"Oh, Mr. Andrews must have a wonderful place!" she exclaimed. "That must be a splendid business. Where is he? How I'd love to see it!"

"You shall some day, Alicia," I told her. "He is in Twenty-ninth Street, and an excellent fellow he is."

I then explained to her how Andrews had insisted upon planting the book on my shelves.

Alicia gazed at me in silence for a moment, then suddenly tears glittered in her eyes.

"It's because of us," she said, with a quivering lip, "because we came that you couldn't buy it!"

"Don't talk rubbish, Alicia," I flared at her. "A collector gets almost as much pleasure in thinking of books he can't get as in those he buys. Don't you think you alone are worth more to me than an old Boswell?"

"No," she murmured gloomily, "but I'm going to try to be."

BOOK TWO

CHAPTER XII

MANY months have passed since I last made an entry in this, which I mean to be a record of my life for later years, when I am grown old and white and memory gives back vividly only the days of childhood.

It must be that the stoking of the furnace below all winter, or else my absorption in Visconti's, has banished reflection upon events from out of my mind. It is not reflection that was banished, however, but only the energy to record it. The folk who work the treadmill leave few records behind them. And I am of the treadmill, occupant of an office chair, one of the gray mass of dwellers in the suburbs of life.

The office of Visconti's, that was at first like a queer old wharf in some foreign city to a ship from distant parts, has grown familiar and almost homelike, so that I feel the barnacles gathering about my hulk at the mooring place.

It is ever the same. I come and I labor and I go. The chair and the desk await me of a morning and by ten o'clock it is as though I had never left them. I go forth of an afternoon into freedom and feel a momentary desire to wander about as of old. The bland frontages of New York still have a lure for me. But the nestlings for whom I am laboring are at Crestlands and to them I automatically hasten my steps.

But is all that about to end?

To-day, for the first time since his disappearance, I heard of poor Laura's husband,— Pendleton.

For to-day I have received an astonishing letter from Dibdin, and it is that, I suppose, which has stirred me to writing again.

"Be prepared," Dibdin's letter begins, after his usual abrupt manner, "be prepared for a sort of shock."

"A week ago I arrived in Yokohama with half a schooner-load of stocks and stones, carvings, idols, etc., homeward bound.

"If you have ever been in Yokohama you will remember the Grand Hotel on the Bund." Yes, I do remember. It was the one bright spot for me in Japan on my brief and disappointing journey six years ago. Heaven knows why I went there. Once I had viewed the Temples at Nikko, the sacred deer on the Island of Miyajima and the volcanic cone of Fujiyama, there was nothing else to do. I am not an ethnologist and there were no bookshops. While awaiting my steamer, the only refuge was that self-same Grand Hotel at Yokohama, where you can still sit in a chair facing a window, as commercial travelers in provincial hotels in America sit, and look out across the water towards Tokio, and smoke and idle and gossip. Of an afternoon there is tea with excellent little cakes — served by Japanese girl's in kimonos so gorgeous that even a geisha would be too modest to wear them in the street. The color, however, is meant for western eyes. The ladies, American and English from Tokio and thereabout, wives of commission merchants, agents, naval officers, diplomats, tourists, gather around and do what they can to annihilate reputations,— as is the way the world over.

There is also a bar — the longest in Asia. Incidentally, every bar in the East is the longest and men from Hongkong, Shanghai, Peking, Kobe and Yokohama carry the measurements of their respective bars in their heads for purposes of competitive argument. We all

need something to brag about, and there's little else in those parts. When the ladies have finished their tea and have gone to their rooms or their 'rickshaws, the bar at the Grand is the next halting stage for the men. I have not thought of it for years, though it is vivid enough to me now. It is one of the five points on the globe where, if you loiter long enough, you are certain to encounter every one you ever knew. But — Pendleton!

"If you remember this setting," runs Dibdin's letter, "you will realize how easy it was even for a bear like me to pick up quickly the gossip of the place and, incidentally, the legend of Patterson. Patterson I learned was a drifter, an idler, a gambler, and a staunch support of the Grand bar. He is adroit, suave, pleasant, shifty — an American. Some trader found him on the beach in the Marquesas, took him along for company among the islands and ultimately landed him here. He has traded in skins, in silk, in insurance; is said to have all but killed a man in a card brawl and has cleaned out many a tourist at poker. Now, he is no longer allowed to play cards at the Grand.

"I had a curiosity to see this bird of plumage and two days ago, Mainwaring, the excellent manager of this hotel, pointed him out to me.

"Judge of my amazement, as novelists say, when I recognized in Patterson none other than the author of all your troubles, your vanished brother-in-law — *Pendleton!*

"Will it surprise you to learn that my first emotion was a desire to rush upon him as he leaned across the bar and drive a knife into his back?

"Instead, however, I got Mainwaring to introduce me and if Pendleton was surprised, he concealed it successfully. Presently he was drinking my liquor and chattering about the islands from which I am a recent arrival. If I disguised the cold rage I felt against the

man you must give me credit for more diplomacy than you ordinarily do.

"'You talk like a New Yorker,' I presently let fall in a casual manner.

"'Ah, there you have me!' he threw out in a blandly mysterious sort of way. 'Truth is, I don't know where I come from!'

"In short, he tried on the lapsed memory sort of thing. Woke up one day to find himself at Manila. Didn't know his own name or who he was or whence. Initials on his linen were J. P. so he took the name of Patterson — as good as any other, and so forth. Very sad. But then one must take life as one finds it. Some of us are elected to martyrdom in this world. That, you understand, was his drift.

"'Well,' I told him calmly, 'if you really want to know who you are, I can tell you.'

"He turned, I thought, a shade paler, but he played his part smoothly.

"'You don't mean it!' he exclaimed with a quite seraphic ecstasy. 'You know me! My God, man, you are my deliverer come at last!'

"'You are Jim Pendleton,' I told him quietly and then I told him a few other things. My reasoning was like this: If he is the thorough hound I thought he was, he would have an excellent chance of bolting — and good riddance. If there was a shred of decency left in the man, now was the time for it to show.

"Well, he surprised me. I saw real tears in his eyes. He begged for every detail I could give him. His voice broke when he tried to ask questions about Laura and the kids. He has not bolted. He is quite pathetically attached to me. I am dashed if I can tell whether it's real or not. I don't believe for a minute in the lapsed memory dodge, but I am flabbergasted. He seems so pitifully

keen for every scrap I can tell him. Maybe the poor brute is really ashamed of his past and is trying only to save his face under this rigmarole of lost identity? He clings to me and I have him, so to speak, under observation. If it should even seem remotely possible to make a man of him again, don't you think the risk of bringing him home might be worth taking? I don't know, I don't know. I shall use the best judgment I've got about me, but don't for a moment think I'll let you down. It's your interest I'm thinking of and the interest of the kids.

"I can't leave here for several weeks yet. That ought to give me time to take his measure. I know what he has been. Question is, can a leopard change his spots, or a beachcomber his character? We'll see, Randolph, my boy, we'll see what we see. Hard luck is hard luck, but this man — well, I needn't tell you. There is such a thing, to be sure, as trying back. I'd like to have a second chance myself, if I behaved like a villain. But of this fellow I am far from sure. I will say, though, that he's drinking less and trying to keep decent not only in my own sight, but to the surprise of all the white colony here.

"You will hear from me again before long."

As I read, I felt gradually overshadowed by the immense somber fact conveyed in this letter. It was like a black cloud bank that comes up swiftly, blotting out the sun from over the landscape. It was not a thing to blink, to wave aside or to dismiss with a shrug of the shoulders. It was instant and tyrannous, demanding anew urgent thought and decision. Fortunately I am no longer the same creature that was bodily hurled from tranquillity and leisure, like a monk from his cell, into the cold wind-swept ways of life. I seem a little less like chaff in the breeze. My backbone seemed actually to stiffen and settle as I posed the problem.

The problem is the fate of the children. To receive and re-create Pendleton means to give them up.

Well — and did I not assume their care only because there was none else? Now there would be — there might be — some one else. Pendleton has a legal right to his own children and, if he could establish it satisfactorily, no doubt a moral right as well.

The advent of Pendleton might prove to have incalculable advantages for myself. Here, on the one side, is the treadmill. On the other there is, or there was, ease and leisure and dreams. My small competency is gone in the wake of that man's destructive progress. But for myself, I might manage an easier and more agreeable way of subsisting than the way of Visconti's. Those are the cold facts, clearly enough — but somehow they will not let me rest. My world has been violently jarred, for all my painful calmness, and I seem unable to fit the parts again into exactly the old solidity of groove and joint. There are lurking interstices which I cannot fill. "Who is Kim — Kim — Kim?" the hero of an unforgettable tale was wont to ask himself. And he felt his soul floating off and dipping into the infinite. Likewise, I ask myself now, Who is Randolph Byrd? And the startling truth returns that the children in my house and I are inseparable, that I and they are one!

With this and the fact that Pendleton is in all likelihood coming back to claim them, I am, pending further news from Dibdin, left to grapple. At any rate, Dibdin also is returning.

It is now the spring and the year is beginning to smile again. I have been prospering at Visconti's and my income is now again the same as it was before ever the children came to me — before I became a business man. But there is not a soul to whom I can confide my new dilemma.

There is Minot Blackden, the glass stainer, whom I have finally discovered to be a near neighbor of Visconti's. To be exact, his studio and living quarters are in King Street, and we sometimes have our lunch together. But Blackden is so much in the grip of his medieval art that it gets into his food, stains his tapering hands and even spatters upon his finely pointed blue-black beard. All he can see in me is the Philistine who has cast all else aside for the sizzling fleshpots. When I chanced to mention having four children in my house, he looked upon me as a bird-of-Paradise might look upon a polar bear; I was to him a visible but incredible symbol of something strange and gross. There is nothing placid or resigned about Blackden. He is intense, incandescent.

"Do you realize," he said to me, "that I am restoring a lost art to the world?"

"But does it give you food?" I asked him.

"What does food matter?" he expostulated. "What does anything else in the world matter?"

Nevertheless, he was eager to take up my suggestion concerning the writing of a booklet upon his new craft and he has been sending it out broadcast. But so intensely devotional is his attitude to the whole business that I have not the face to suggest payment for the work, nor has he referred to it again. I know little of his art, but I know that his returns are increasing. It is obvious that I cannot burden a soul, burning with that gemlike flame of Blackden's, with any such confidence as the impending return of Pendleton. At times I think that Minot Blackden and Gertrude Bayard ought to marry each other. They are both so single-minded and so absolutely sure of themselves. But in the meantime there is no one I can talk to.

No—absolutely no one.

Walking to Grand Central station these brilliant afternoons is a thing I cannot resist. It is the only exercise I get. Crossing Washington Square, I strike into Fifth Avenue and by the time I reach Fourteenth Street I have a delicious sense of losing myself, of merging into the crowd, that is very soothing after a day in the office. There is nothing so stimulating as the energetic crowd in Fifth Avenue. At Brentano's bookstore I usually pause and scrutinize the window. I am very sound in the latest novels and the newest developments in stationery.

To-day, as my eyes were feasting on the cover jacket of Mr. Arnold Bennett's latest, a lady coming down the avenue likewise paused before the window and as we glanced at each other I found I was facing Gertrude. Of course she had a perfect right to cut me. She smiled uncertainly instead and put out her hand.

"Hello, Ranny," she murmured casually. "No reason why we can't meet as friends, is there?"

"Not the least in the world," I returned hastily. "Why should there be?"

"I didn't know — but of course you always were a sensible person."

I grinned in my guilty fashion.

"How is everything?" she continued brightly. "I heard — about your firm. You in business now?"

I mentioned my connection with Visconti's Banca e Casa Commerciale.

"You're a sort of hero of romance," she smiled speculatively over my head. "And the kiddies," she added, "they all right?"

"Going strong." She made no reference to Alicia but I thought it only decent not to leave her in doubt. "Everything in my household is about the same," I said. She nodded.

The years of our friendship flashed through my mind, with a sense of regret at the passing and crumbling of human relations. Gertrude would quite naturally have been the one I could have talked to concerning the probable return of Pendleton. Then, on a sudden occurred one of those coincidences which invariably surprise me. For what Gertrude uttered quite carelessly as though merely to fill the conversational pause, was this:

"No news of their father, I suppose?"

I have never yet lied to Gertrude. I detest lies in general. I was silent. My face must have betrayed me. Gertrude glanced into my eyes and in a startled voice she queried:

"*Have* you?"

Briefly, without going into detail, I told her.

"Why, Ranny," she exclaimed with a new manner, in a new voice, "that's the most wonderful thing I ever heard. Wonderful! That's the greatest luck for you. Your troubles will be over!"

"Ah, will they?" I speculated ruefully, rubbing my cheek. "That's the problem. Shall I be able to trust the children to him again?"

"Don't be a — foolish!" she retorted in almost her old manner. "The responsibility will make a man of him again. Besides — you'll have to. They are his. I should think you'd jump for joy at the relief. Dear me, what a story!"

"Oh — er — I must beg you not — not to mention a word of this to any one," I stammered. "You understand — it's a ticklish business — for the children's sake."

"Don't be absurd," she retorted impatiently. "I don't blab. Will you promise to let me hear how — how things come out?" I promised.

At this moment Minot Blackden, his eyes blinded by

visions of rose windows, no doubt, bore down and all but collided with us. I introduced them mechanically to mitigate his apologies and left them both bound in the same direction southward. Gertrude waved a hand gayly.

"I'll expect good news!" were her parting words.

So I have told some one, I reflected, as I made my way toward Grand Central, and Gertrude expressed what all the world would say: "I ought to jump for joy at the relief. Besides, I shall have to turn them over to Pendleton." The wheels of the train I somberly boarded kept insistently repeating the same self-evident opinion. In addition there was the sickness of death in my soul for the folly of having given the thing away to Gertrude, of all people.

I wish I were not obliged to parry social invitations just at present. The excellent Visconti who had asked me to dinner two or three times during the winter, has suddenly taken a notion to ask me at least once every week. I hope I am not grown so churlish but that I appreciate his well-meant courtesy. But the fag is too great.

He has a house in Thirteenth Street neighboring on St. Vincent's Hospital, and he also has a motherless daughter, Gina, abounding in vitality, who must be amused. The proximity to the hospital, he intimates, the smell of carbolate and iodoform, depress young blood, and Gina, being super-American, must not be allowed to remember that there is anything unpleasant in life. I trust I am not the only vessel chosen to bring more lively spirits to that girl.

The effort for me is immense. I go to Crestlands after office hours, dress, return to town, and then make a late train for Crestlands again. The food is excellent

and Gina sings prettily in a soprano as rich as her coloring. But the next morning Visconti's does not enjoy the fruit of my undimmed energies.

More recently, Visconti has urged me not to dress and in that I see the fine hand of Gina at work. As an American-born girl, Gina is quick and eager to read the signs and weather indications. And though I am becoming dexterous in excuses, I dined at the Visconti's last night nevertheless. Gina sang the *Sole mio* and *Una voce poco fa* and even told my fortune in cards, predicting that I should "be married a second time."

"But never a first time?" I queried simply.

"Oh, then you've never been married at all!" Gina exulted, and she energetically read the cards for me afresh. Her sortilege evidently is not a perfect science. But it occurs to me that by means of it the clever Gina found out more about my personal life than ever I had vouchsafed to her in all our acquaintance.

When I returned home I found Alicia in my study sitting late over the catalogue, a copy of which she is now completing. She jumped from her chair.

"Oh, I am so glad you've come, Uncle Ranny," she clapped her hands joyously. "I have found something we have overlooked."

"What is it, Alicia?" And my gaze was, I admit, fascinated by her flushed cheeks and starlike eyes sparkling with excitement. She seemed the Muse incarnating those books, the very spirit of beauty they enshrine. And yet she is not quite sixteen.

"It's Shelley's 'Alastor'!" she cried. "And it's so thin that it had slipped in between the covers of another book. It's a first edition — 1816, isn't it?"

"Yes, Alicia. And a very beautiful poem besides."

"Oh, isn't it!" she cried in exultation. "I have read it all, Uncle Ranny, and do you know what I found

out?" — and her voice became more solemn — "it is your life Shelley was writing!"

I laughed uproariously.

"Yes, he did!" flashed Alicia. "Only your life is so much better. He was so absorbed in himself, Alastor, that he died in his loneliness. And you — you are simply surrounded by people who love you. You — !"

And then, I regret to record, self-consciousness overtook Alicia. She became aware of her own vehemence and blushing furiously made as if to run out of the room.

My position of vantage near the door enabled me to stop her.

"Wait, my dear," I endeavored to lift her lowered chin. "Enthusiasm is nothing to be ashamed of. It's one of the finest things in life. And I'll tell you more — we are always applying to ourselves everything we read in books."

"Isn't that," murmured Alicia shamefacedly, "why people love books?" Foolish girl — to wake the sleeping pedant in me!

"Not altogether, Alicia. When we get older we become less personal. I love books because they hold the truth and the wisdom of men's minds. And aside from life and love, Alicia, wisdom and truth are the greatest realities in the world. There is death, of course, but who cares to dwell upon death?"

"I always did think that life and — and — love were greater than books," stammered Alicia earnestly. "And now that you yourself say so, I am sure of it!"

Astonishing child! When has she had the time to speculate upon the magnitude of life and love? Always that young thing keeps revealing herself to me afresh. I looked at her in silence for a moment. Here was a better counselor than any one, Dibdin excepted, with

whom I might discuss the impending return of Pendleton.

"Alicia," I began in another tone, "there is something I should like to talk to you about. It's criminally late, I know, and you ought to be in bed, but since you will dissipate on the catalogue, I'll keep you up a little longer." I led her back to a chair and she gazed at me wide-eyed.

"Is it anything about — the — children?" she whispered, somewhat frightened.

"Yes — in a way — it is about the children. But more particularly it is about their father. Have you ever heard of him?"

"Their father! — I thought he was dead!" she murmured, awe-struck.

"There were times when we all thought so. He disappeared some years ago. But he's alive, Alicia. I've just heard from Dibdin, who found him in Japan." Her eyes grew wider.

"How terrible!" she breathed. "Does he know all — that has happened?"

"He does now — of course he didn't until Mr. Dibdin told him." And then this occurred to me. Ought I to shield Pendleton to the extent of telling her positively that he had lost his memory or identity? No. A confidant deserves scrupulous honesty, even if that confidant be as young as Alicia. "He told Dibdin," I went on, "that he lost his memory of the past and found himself one day stranded in Manila. Led rather a wild and worthless life afterwards — people who lose their memories seem to do that."

"Do you think that's true?" she queried.

"I don't know, Alicia, but when he comes back I suppose we'll have to accept that version. Dibdin will have some advice on that point, I feel sure."

Alicia remained silent for a time lost in reflection.

Her child's face in her perturbation was the face of a grown woman.

"Do you think he'll want to take back the children, Uncle Ranny?"

"That's the crux of the whole matter, Alicia. I don't know. But if he does, he'll have a right to do so, of course; they are his."

"Oh, oh!" and her hands flew up to her face in a gesture of poignant despair. "Turn them over to such a man! Is that the way the world's arranged?"

I smiled gloomily. I saw that there was no need of comment upon the arrangement of the world. This girl young in her teens understood it as well as any one.

"Then I'd have to go, too," she uttered hoarsely with a dry sob of bitterness in her throat.

"Not necessarily," I interposed.

"Oh, yes, I should," she insisted doggedly, as though driving something painful into her flesh. "But it doesn't matter about me. But, Uncle Ranny, you won't — you can't give them up! They're all so happy here. Little Jimmie and Laura and Randolph! What chance would they have of growing up fine — away from you — with a man like that? You won't let them go — you won't, you won't! Oh, it would be horrible, horrible!" she ended passionately.

"Listen, my dear," I tried to calm her. "I had no wish to harrow your feelings. I told you because you love the children — and we must face all this together. I shall want your help, your support." She flashed a sweet look mingled of pride and gratitude.

"After all you — have been through," she murmured incoherently. "But why don't you do this, Uncle Ranny!" and with the quick transition possible to youth, she was again alive, eager, excited, this little fellow conspirator of mine. "Why don't you let him come here

and live right in this house for a while? We'll be awfully crowded," she ran on with flushed energy, "but we'll find room for him. And let's be awfully nice to him — and believe everything he says. Then we could watch him, and I just know we'll find out whether he's all right or not!"

I laughed at her enthusiasm.

"You forget, Alicia," I informed her, "that even if he shouldn't prove all right, he is still the father of those children."

"I don't care," she returned stoutly. "If he's bad and sees that we see he's bad, he wouldn't have the face to take them away from here. Even a bad father wants his children to be all right!"

"And how in the world do you know that, you astounding infant?"

"Oh, I know!" with a triumphant laugh. "At the Home — some fathers brought their children and cried — one of them did — because he was so bad he didn't think he was fit to have a child near him. I had tiptoed into the matron's office, and I heard him!"

"Perhaps he didn't want to support the brat," I scoffed to cover up my wonder.

"Well, and do you think *he* will?" Alicia snatched at my words. "A man who ran away from them, loafing round for years? Oh, it will be easy, Uncle Ranny!" she chuckled. "He couldn't fool us!"

"And why, my little Portia, couldn't he?"

"Because," said Alicia thoughtfully, "he will always be thinking of himself and we — won't."

"You mean," I pressed, delightedly, "he'll be self-conscious and give himself away, the while we are clothed in our rectitude?"

"Yes!" she cried, with a laugh. "We'll be thinking of Jimmie and Laura and Randolph — and it's always

easier to think what to do when you're thinking of somebody else — not of yourself."

"And did you discover that also in the matron's office at the Home?" I leaned toward her in amazement.

"No," she bent her gaze downward, "I learned that right here."

I kissed Alicia upon the cheek. It lies heavy at my door that I have shown her too little affection in the past merely because she is not related to me. It startled me to realize that dear to me as Laura's children are, Alicia is the dearest of them all.

As with a gentle good night she slipped away, a profound sigh of relief escaped me. That child succeeded in almost wholly blotting out my feeling of bitter perplexity after talking with Gertrude. Do Alicias upon growing older turn into Gertrudes, I wonder? No, I think not. Surely not.

I now look to the return of Pendleton almost with equanimity.

CHAPTER XIII

I AM agitated like a hen with a newly hatched brood.

It has suddenly been revealed to me that the complacency with which I have been regarding my care and rearing of the children is abysmally false and wholly unjustified.

They are not properly clothed for New York and even here in Crestlands they seem on a sudden pitifully shabby. The competition in that sort of thing in a suburb is keen. Everybody's children seem better dressed than my own and yet, do what I will, I cannot afford to spend more. Randolph's high-school dignity is positively impaired by clothes which he is constantly outgrowing. And the rate at which Jimmie wears out trousers and soils white suits is simply unbelievable. Laura alone seems to have the gift of always keeping her things fresh and wearing them as though they were new.

As for Alicia, that girl ought to be clothed in purple, at least figuratively, if only I could afford it. It seems to me I cannot live another day unless I procure for Alicia a large collection of frocks and blouses and shoes and whatever else would set off that faunlike creature, compact of energy and grace. For almost daily that child grows more beautiful in a way that pulls at my heartstrings.

I trust I am no idiotic parent, or foster parent, to rave about her eyes and complexion and the like. I am as dispassionate as any one can well be. But truly there is something starlike in her eyes and at times, when she is sewing or reading or working on my eternal catalogue,

I surprise her pensive, absorbed in some long thoughts of her own that not for worlds would I disturb. At such moments I am absolutely fascinated by those soft pools of light that irradiate her face.

Are other girls like that at her age, I wonder? It seems scarcely conceivable. At any rate, I have never seen any others like her. But then, I have seen so few.

The truth remains, however, that I positively must dress her better. Even my dull fancy joyously leaps at the vision of Alicia beautifully dressed and diffusing sweetness and fragrance through the house. Of course, I cannot single her out. There is Laura, too. And it might seem invidious, although as the eldest of them all, Alicia is entitled to especial consideration. I cannot moreover allow Pendleton to observe that I have kept his children shabby. Few are the claims that Pendleton can legitimately array against me, but the shabbiness of the children would too flagrantly proclaim my failure. Nor does Dibdin know as yet my rake's progress since Fred Salmon made a business man of me.

But where am I to get the money for clothes when the mere routine of subsistence absorbs it all? There is still Dibdin's yellowing cheque intact, but I cannot use that — no.

Ah — I have it! I shall sell "Alastor!"

Since I had overlooked it, I shall merely assume I never had it. In its Rivière binding "Alastor" should bring at least two hundred dollars and may bring more. Heaven knows it cost me more. It holds some marginal memoranda by Leigh Hunt, which should not detract from its value. Since Alicia opines that my life is more laudable than Alastor's because there are those who love me, she shall profit by her judgment. "Alastor" shall be sacrificed for her soft and lovely frocks.

Sooner or later I had to come to it. What is a volume

more or less compared to the happiness of a household? I am glad I have decided this. So farewell, "Alastor, Spirit of Solitude!"

I seem to be possessed by the mad feverish spirit of carnival.

Having sold my "Alastor" by means of an advertisement in the Sunday *Times* for two hundred and twenty-five dollars, I experienced a sensation of richer blood in my veins by that accession of wealth. "Alastor" has clothed all my family. I am sorry for the old woman who lived in a shoe. She possessed no library. The moral is obvious. What though I parted with a little bit of myself when I parted with that book, I have engrafted something else in its place. For the children also are myself.

I do not delegate Griselda any more to do the buying for them.

First I took Jimmie and Randolph to a men's outfitting shop where the atmosphere is august. Alicia offered to come along, but though Jimmie is hotly attached to her, he was vocal with objections.

"This is men's business," he cried, "and us men must go alone."

"*We* men," corrected Laura, laughing and kissing him.

"*Us* men know how to talk!" he retorted, violently rubbing the kiss from his cheek. Kisses, he implied, were all very well in their place, but not at important crises in masculine lives, not when the *toga virilis* was hanging grandly from their shoulders.

"Come on, old man," Randolph interposed with a wink in my direction, and Jimmie's wrath was appeased. The "old man" soothed and uplifted him to the proper pitch of virile dignity.

The seventy-five dollars laid out upon those two boys have given me more satisfaction than anything else recently — until I spent the balance upon the girls. Men's shops are prosaic and dull compared with those Greek temples that line Fifth Avenue with feminine apparel. As the paymaster for the boys I was unnoticed. As the "uncle" of the two girls opening the door to heart's desire, I was an object of almost affectionate solicitude to the saleswoman. They were alert to help and advise. What a freemasonry, an empire within an empire, is the domain of women's clothes! In the latest slang and in words from Shakespeare the jaded saleswomen were eager to interpret my wishes.

"I want some frocks and things for these girls," I announced boldly in one of the great shops. "Not too expensive but things nice girls ought to wear."

"I know," nasally asserted an efficient blonde, ceasing her mastication and mysteriously secreting what she was chewing somewhere in her capacious mouth. "Somethin' nice and classy — and quiet, but — *you* know!"

"Er — precisely —"

"Neat but not gaudy?" put in her more pallid, more "cultured" companion, with a faded smile to complete the specification.

"Ah — exactly so," I murmured and Laura seemed to experience a difficulty in restraining herself from giggling.

Alicia, however, with the simple directness that is hers, proceeded quietly to mention voiles and organdies and soon the discussion became technical and I helpless. I thought it wise to whisper to Alicia the amount of money at her disposal. She gasped her astonishment with a blush and then a beautiful light of gratitude and pleasure leaped into her eyes and I believe the child was going to

cry. I turned away quickly, and steadily she proceeded with the business in hand.

To the lady who quoted Polonius, the neat but not gaudy one, I intrusted the selection of those things that I was not to see; she was sincerely gratified at my confidence and, I believe, conscientious.

There was just about enough change left for refreshments at Huyler's for the girls and paterfamilias. Gay were the spirits in which we three traveled homeward. How ridiculous Gertrude would make me, if she knew it!

I felt excitement and happiness bounding in my veins, a new quality of those emotions, the like of which I had never experienced before. And my heart positively missed a beat when the crushing thought struck me: Must I now lose these young creatures and pass again into the emptiness of life?

We Americans are like the French in that we think our climate the best in the world. Or, if not the best, at least so far superior to many others that, like the French, we are steeped in vanity about it.

Of Saturdays I reach home early after midday, yet it has been persistently and infallibly raining every Saturday afternoon the entire blessed spring. If perchance I want to take a walk and breathe some air, I cannot stir out of the house.

Yet a nervous restlessness possesses me: I must have some diversion. It suddenly occurred to me to ask the girls to put on their various new frocks that came last evening. For a moment I was a little ashamed at the thought. But at bottom, I suppose, every male is a Persian Ahasuerus, desirous of displaying and gloating over the beauty of his women folk. I have no doubt but that the king secretly admired Vashti even though he was wroth at her disobedience.

Laura, it appeared, was in the next street at the house

of a school friend, but Alicia complied eagerly, displaying anything but the suffragette indignation of Vashti. She was, in fact, eager to parade her frocks with quite feminine excitement.

In her clinging voile, in soft-tinted organdie, in white slippers and silk stockings, Alicia appeared,— a vision surprising, disturbingly radiant with youthful charm. There was something with a blue sash that made her simply exquisite, the very incarnation of grace. Her hair gathered tightly at the nape of her neck and then spreading out into a great brush, a cloud of shimmering fine gold on her shoulders, seemed the only mark of childhood left that prevented me from being like another St. Anthony, miserably afraid of her.

I know not what devil possessed me to ask her to go and put up her hair before she took off that frock. How different must have been the character of Persia's queen. For Alicia ran out of the room and almost in a twinkling she was back with her hair up.

I sat for a moment staring at her speechless, dry-lipped and open-mouthed. For before me, flushed and sparkling, stood the most adorable young creature I had ever seen. Why should there be so much mystery in feminine hair?

"You — you — *child!*" I blurted out finally in a sort of choleric tenderness. "How dare you look so beauti — so grown up in my house!"

A peal of excited laughter was her answer and she made as if she would rush toward me with open arms, as might an affectionate child eager to caress an indulgent parent — and then on a sudden she checked herself, a blush suffusing her cheeks and her very ears.

"Go call Griselda," I commanded, to cover her confusion, "and show her the young woman we've been harboring in the guise of a child."

Alicia ran out of the room to comply and for a moment I remained sitting in my chair as under a spell. Then I rose hastily to dispel such nonsensical emotions and left my room, only to come face to face with Alicia and Griselda in the dining room.

"Oh, ay — yes!" muttered my aging Griselda, her swarthy countenance hot from the kitchen stove, looking more forbiddingly sybilline than ever, "It's all over!" she added mysteriously.

"What do you mean — all over?" I demanded a little stupidly, though dimly I suppose I understood her.

"The young besoms grow up sae fast, it's a meeracle they dinna wed in their cradles!"

"Wed!" I cried in disgust at the word. "You women are always thinking of only one thing — even you, Griselda. Go," I turned to Alicia, "let down your hair again this minute, so you won't put such wild notions into Griselda's frivolous mind."

Alicia laughed deliciously and even Griselda with a sort of dark twisted smile reiterated:

"Oh, ay — the young besoms!" Whereupon my young woman impulsively threw her arms about Griselda and kissed the brown cheek with gusto. Griselda returned by pinching Alicia's cheek fiercely.

My nephew Randolph and a companion, a tall gawky boy coming into the house at that moment, stood in their raincoats at the dining-room door and gaped, blocking Alicia's path.

"I say! Look who's here!" my young hopeful exclaimed with a low whistle, wagging his head from side to side. The other boy merely stared in dumb awe, twisting his wet cap in his fingers. That gawk and Alicia are the same age, yet — the difference!

"Let her go through and unmask," I waved them aside

and Alicia, with her head down, ran laughing out of the room.

I returned to my chair and sat down as one dazed. My policy henceforth will be to frown on suchlike tricks — though I myself had instigated this one. What an occupation for a man of books and tranquillity — one who desired to write of Brunetto Latini — to add to the body of scholarship upon Dante!

And suddenly I put my head down on my arms and laughed long and I am sure quite meaninglessly.

For if I were a woman, I might just as easily have sobbed in a way to tear out the heart. Decidedly the suspense of awaiting news from Dibdin regarding Pendleton must be undermining my nerves.

I am gey ill to live with.

I seem to myself like the irascible old gentlemen in the comedies with the prithees and monstrous fine epigrams, forever taking snuff — save that there is no comedy about me.

I take down books and I cannot read them. What pleasure I used to experience in leaving some of the leaves uncut in fine editions so as to cut them on further readings! I have tried to extract that joy by cutting some recently, but there is no joy in it.

Why am I so certain that Pendleton will take away all these that I love and leave me desolate? All his past seems to argue against the probability. Yet constantly I see before me the picture of their going in a body with that man while I stand speechless, attempting to smile benignantly. How we dramatize ourselves, even the least imaginative amongst us! And all the time I feel as though great gouts of blood were dripping, dripping from my heart in nameless anguish.

Alicia, that divine child, is watching me unobtrusively

though closely, whenever she can. She surrounds me with comforts and attentions. But like some sick owl, I prefer to brood alone.

The somewhat isolated position of my châlet on the rock and the lack of a wife in the household has saved me from making intimate acquaintances among my Crestlands neighbors. But there is one young man, Judkins, an architect in the stucco house opposite, who strides over to my porch and insists upon talking of his performances at golf.

"Ought to join the Club," he keeps reiterating. "Nothing like eighteen holes to take the kinks outa your brain after the hullabaloo in the city."

"Er — do I seem to have many kinks?" I ask, whereat he laughs in his harsh voice.

"All got 'em!" he cries. "Can't get away from 'em. Books!" he adds explosively, "books are no good! They give you the willies!"

And that man claims to have studied at the Beaux Arts! Edmond de Goncourt, that neurasthenic philosopher, prayed that he might make a hundred thousand francs from his play "Germinie Lacerteux," so that he might buy the house opposite and put this notice on it: "To be let to people who have no children, who do not play any musical instrument, and who will be permitted to keep only goldfish as pets." As for me, I should waive the children, the pets and the musical instruments; I would merely say, "No proselyting golfers need apply."

Alicia, to mitigate my mood, I suppose, devised a picnic in the woods. No one was to come save the children and I and that gawky companion of Randolph's, the boy John Purington, lest Randolph should be bored. Randolph, it appears, is easily bored. The consciousness of my recent hypochondriac behavior led me to accept the suggestion with alacrity.

The luncheon Griselda prepared was packed in paper boxes by Alicia and together, *en masse,* our little procession set forth and made its way to a grove less than two miles distant bordering on the great Croton aqueduct.

Randolph and the gawky boy fell at once to tossing a baseball, Jimmie rolled delightedly about the lush grass, still grappling with his insoluble problem of rolling up a slope and still perplexed as to why it should be easier to roll down. Laura ran to his aid and Alicia sat beside me and laughed.

"That is the whole problem of life that Jimmie is facing," I observed gloomily.

"No, it isn't, Uncle Ranny," she put her hand on my arm as she contradicted. "That is only the law of gravitation. There is a lot more to life than that!"

"Yes, Alicia," I lowered my voice, "but when that man comes, how it will hurt to think of little Jimmie, of all those children of my sister's in the care of that man who's really her — her murderer!"

"Please, please, don't think of that!" she begged, with imploring eyes. "That hasn't happened yet. And we'll — we'll manage it somehow. Maybe he's a good man, after all — and, oh, we'll watch him — we'll watch him! Besides, he mayn't come. If he is what you think, then I am sure he won't come!"

That proved a very cheering thought.

Before I knew it, I was myself tossing a ball with Alicia and romping with the rest of them.

It was only after the lunch had been eaten under the trees and the egg shells and papers were gathered and stowed away, and the gawky boy proceeded clumsily to monopolize Alicia, who has not the heart to snub anybody, that my depression returned.

Whereupon Alicia gayly proposed that it was time to

think of going home, because Jimmie was drowsy and must not forego his nap.

Was it adroitness or spontaneity? I cannot tell, but it is marvelous how that girl anticipates and understands.

It was a happy, tired, air-steeped company that returned home.

A telegram has just arrived. Dibdin and Pendleton have landed in San Francisco! . . .

CHAPTER XIV

PENDLETON is here. He has been here a week.

Like one in the dazed excitement of some dream, the sort of farrago that leaves you limp and weakly smiling when you wake up and see the sun, I have been going about with numb limbs strangely galvanized, not so much into activity as the expectation of activity.

What is it I have been expecting to happen? I hardly know. But perhaps I have been expecting melodrama. And I am overcome by the obvious truism that genuine melodrama is anything but melodramatic. That is why melodrama on the stage, with its ranting and strutting and flourishes, disgusts one by its bathos.

The presence of Pendleton in my house, occupying my bedroom while I have withdrawn into my little study, is the essence of melodrama.

Yet every one and everything is in a tacit conspiracy to make it seem natural. There is a tension in the atmosphere, without doubt, but we are all of us madly, energetically ignoring it, hiding it.

The man's conduct has been astounding, unimpeachable, unexceptionable.

He out-Enochs Enoch Arden. Yet — why should I disguise the fact to myself — I hate him. That, too, I suppose, is melodrama. But do what I will, he remains detestable to me. I cannot trust him. I try, however, not to show it. Dibdin has acquired a deep furrow between the eyes, due doubtless to his sense of responsibility

in having resuscitated Pendleton. He carries the air of some magician or sorcerer who has evoked a demon and is overwhelmed with terror by the problem of what to do with him.

But I must in decency acknowledge that Pendleton's behavior has been without blemish.

Dibdin had sent me a long night letter from San Francisco saying he would remain there a few days, "to give the fellow chance to bolt if he wants to." There had been other telegrams. I was not to meet them at the train but to give explicit directions. It was as well. I could not have met Pendleton at the train even if he were coming from the dead. A week ago, when Dibdin telephoned from the city, I went so far as to order a cab to meet them.

There again the histrionics of the situation were at a hopeless disadvantage. For what I remember most vividly of that Saturday evening was the sickness of my soul as I sat awaiting their arrival. Again and again I had steeled myself to tell the children of their father's coming. I framed words and sentences in my mind until the cold perspiration moistened my forehead, but I could not face the ordeal. I had thought I knew myself — that I was steeled to the tests of life. But I saw I was still a reed. It came to within a couple of hours before their arrival and still I had not told them. I found myself on my two-inch terrace and a stream of profanity was breaking from my lips. On a sudden I saw Jimmie standing beside me. Shame and chagrin overtook me and I bent down to him and begged him to forgive me.

"Don't you mind me, Uncle Ranny," he put his hand in mine. "I'm a man, and I know a man has got to swear sometimes."

"No, Jimmie — not if the man has brains enough with which to think."

That contact with the child, however, seemed to release something in my clamped and aching skull.

"Run, Jimmie," I said, "and send Alicia out to me. I wish to speak to her."

Jimmie, to whom commissions are delight, was off like an arrow.

Some moments elapsed before Alicia could come to me and during that time I had a mad impulse to fly from it all, to seize my hat and steal away, to take a train to the city and not to return until it was all over. But I waited nevertheless and Alicia, who had been helping Griselda, came running out flushed, with concern in her eyes.

"Alicia," I began miserably, "I have tried to screw up my courage to tell the children about the coming of — of their father. But I simply can't do it, Alicia; it's — it's beyond me. I — I want you to tell them," I faltered like a guilty schoolboy. The girl winced perceptibly but —

"All right," she answered; "do you mean now?"

"About half-past six — the train gets here at six thirty-five. You take them into the garden — and keep them there until after the men come, and — I call you."

"Yes — Uncle Ranny," she whispered — "but, oh, please don't worry about it so much!"

"No, my dear," I murmured and at that moment I felt closer to her than to any other living being. To take the children out of the house upon the coming of their father — it sounded like a funeral. And it was at that moment — my funeral. And the rest of the afternoon was a blur and the encompassing world was a shadow. It was broken; no, it was too insubstantial for breaking. It kept thinning and receding away from me and I was left a dully throbbing entity in the primal chaos before Creation.

I was startled at last by hearing the wheezy groan of

an aged taxi outside and like the galvanized corpse I was, I felt my members heavily stirring and propelling me to the door.

On the path in the curiously sickly light of a premature dusk under a clouded, lifeless sky I saw Dibdin and Pendleton, slightly stooping forward to the slope, walking toward me. That moment of poignant joy at seeing Dibdin, of exquisite pain on beholding Pendleton — I shall never forget it!

"Dibdin!" I cried, rushing at his hand and clinging to it to defer as long as possible touching the other's. Then, after ages it seemed, my eyes slowly turned to the tall figure of Pendleton and rested on the fleshy face, somewhat loose and pendulous, smooth-shaven and purplish, with eyes that fell before my own. Finally I disengaged my hand and held it out to him. I could not do otherwise.

"Jim," I murmured and my voice had labored over a universe of barriers to achieve that. But I could utter no more.

He peered at me from his protruding eyes as though he also were struggling, struggling with memory and with memories, with a teeming past, with all that he had been and committed, and for an instant I felt sorry for him.

"Come in," I breathed deeply, and we made our way into the house and into my study.

"Randolph," Pendleton finally uttered with a profound sigh, and then I recalled that he was playing a part. To me the appalling reality of the whole episode had been so excruciating that momentarily I forgot that he was in all likelihood playing a part. But was he? How could he? In the face of these children, in the face of all he is guilty of, how could he play a part, when the truth would raise him almost to a kind of manhood? I

cannot give him the benefit of the doubt and yet I cannot wholly doubt him. Some idiotic simplicity or imbecility inside me makes it impossible for me to envisage any creature in human form as so consummate a villain. Perhaps — perhaps there is something —

"Randolph," he murmured in a deep guttural — "I know you — I remember you — yes, you are — you are — " and he paused. We hung for a moment like things dangling by threads, like marionettes motionless. Then, with a prickling sensation of sweat over all my body, I broke the spell by fumbling with a box of cigarettes and with a hand spasmodically quivering like the needle of a seismograph, I held them out.

"Have a good voyage?" I heard myself saying, as we all smoked and covertly stole glances at one another. I was not flying at his throat. Dibdin puffed heavily with the crease deepening between his eyes and Pendleton's gaze roved questing and unsteady about the room. Melodrama! There never was any except on the stage! In life there is only drama — and pain.

"How are the kids?" Dibdin asked abruptly.

"Fine!" I exclaimed automatically, in an unnatural voice, like a pistol shot. "They are out in the garden there," and Dibdin nodded. I felt certain that his mind also was seeing the analogy to a funeral. And now my brain seemed to be shaking off its dull lethargy. From somewhere in Maeterlinck the haunting memory of a phrase came glimmering through my consciousness, like a dim light through a fog, to the effect that if Socrates and Christ had been in the palace of Agamemnon, the tragedies of the house of Atreus could not have happened. I longed for a little wisdom to deal with the situation.

"Would you like," I turned to Pendleton, "to see the children?"

"The children," he repeated dazedly. "Yes — yes —

I'd like to see them. But — just a moment. The children," he repeated piteously, "but no Laura!"

Sharp, sharp was the stab at my heart when he spoke her name. But either he is a supreme master in deceit or I am the dullest of simpletons. For the struggle through clouds of memory that his features expressed seemed real to me.

"I told you she was dead!" snapped Dibdin gruffly, without turning to him.

"You told me? Ah, yes." And he sighed heavily. "Of course you told me." And his chin sank weightily to his breast. We remained thus silent for a space. Then —

"Come," I said, standing up. "I'll take you to the children."

He rose ponderously, his great frame limp and leaden, and followed me somberly. He seemed sincere enough in his grief, I must own that. Dibdin did not move.

I led him into the garden toward the spot where the children were huddled about Alicia. She was talking to them in low tones and they were listening in dead silence. Never again, I hope, shall I experience that sense of going to my own execution that I experienced at that instant. Execution — no! I could have walked to a gibbet or a guillotine smiling, I am quite sure. What is my life to me? I was walking rather to the execution of those four young souls under the gnarled old apple tree.

Alicia, too! By Heaven! Like a lightning stroke that fact crashed into my soul. He would take Alicia also. No — no! He had no claim upon her, thank God!

"Not Alicia!" my voice broke out from the turmoil of my thoughts like the voice in a dream breaking the barriers of sleep.

"Eh?" said Pendleton faintly.

"Did you call, Uncle Ranny?" Alicia turned and asked in a clear, steady voice.

"Yes, Alicia," I struggled for control. "Here is Mr. Pendleton — come to see the children." I meant to say "his children," but I could not.

The whole sickly-colored evening seemed to shudder at my words. The children seemed like wraiths under the tree to shudder away from the intruding material world.

In a moment — what a tragic moment — Pendleton was bending toward them, peering, peering into their white, frightened faces. Then his gaze settled on Alicia and hung there for a space.

"This must be Randolph," he finally turned to the eldest boy, "grown — grown up — isn't it?" and his arms stirred forward.

"Yes, sir," the boy answered hoarsely and put out his hand.

"And this — can this be baby Laura?" Laura hung her head then raised it bravely and with shy resolution held out her hand. Pendleton took it and kissed her clumsily on the cheek.

Jimmie, hanging back, clung to Alicia's skirt and watched the proceedings with troubled stealth from behind her.

"And this is Jimmie," I said, taking the child by the shoulder — "the youngest of them."

As Pendleton was stooping toward him, Jimmie uttered a wild scream of heartbreaking terror, wrenched himself from my hold and fled like some little wounded animal toward the house. Pendleton gave a short, mirthless laugh.

My throat was parched, my heart was thumping like a rabbit's, but how I loved Jimmie at that moment!

"He is only a baby," put in Alicia softly.

Again Pendleton looked at her — obliquely.

"And this is —" he murmured.

"Alicia Palmer," I supplied hastily, "who has been looking after them."

"Ah, Alicia — a little deputy mother —" and he held out his hand with shamefaced suavity.

The scene was over — the incredible episode — commonplace enough as I write it down. But I lived a dozen melodramas in that eternity that a clock would tick off in three or four minutes of time.

CHAPTER XV

WALKING about as I do under sentence, I am like a man of my acquaintance, a stodgy, a terrible Philistine, who cherished for years a fancy that he could write Gilbert and Sullivan operas. In all his life he had probably never rhymed anything more subtle than love, above and dove. Since any fool, in his opinion, could supply the music, he aspired only to the Gilbertian librettos. Incessantly and hopelessly out of key he went about humming the Sullivan tunes to the lyrics he alleged to have in his mind.

Similarly, I go about with a sense of mendacious buoyancy,— like a shipwrecked passenger bobbing helplessly in a troubled sea, but still alive; a flickering glimmer of hope, like a desperate man facing a tiger, but still undevoured.

Brazenly I still expect happiness to emerge, somehow, out of hopelessness.

It is easy, of course, to lapse into moods of despondency, into wishing I were dead, since I cannot live in happiness,

> And shake the yoke of inauspicious stars
> From this world-wearied flesh.

But such moments pass. There is a sort of tonic in the rough of life when the smooth is absent, and the wits, my poor dull wits, brace themselves for the shock of action. I feel certain now that in all my years of tranquillity it is the salt of suffering that was lacking. Yet

who would seek suffering for its own sake? I know, however, that I feel younger and more energetic to-day than ever I felt five years ago.

Even Pendleton has his uses. He is the thorn in the side, the fox gnawing at my vitals under the cloak, but here he is in my house as its guest.

He goes with me to the city of a morning on his quest for work, "a connection" as he calls it, and often I find him at home before me when I arrive, in my room, smoking, or out in the garden with the children. I wince inwardly, but I hope I do not show it.

I spoke of hating him, but that is untrue. You cannot persistently hate any man, notably a guest in your house. You can only suspect him. Yet, when I see the children still shy of him, why does it give me a throbbing sense of triumph? I do not know, but so it is. Randolph alone seems to approach him nearer as the days go by. They go on walks together and Randolph confides to Alicia that he is fascinated by the tales of his father's experiences in the tropics, of ships and islands and pearl-fishing and native customs. I fancy Pendleton must be selectively on the alert in his narratives with his young son as the listener. His past must contain many things that none of us in this quiet haven will ever hear recounted.

But I am indifferent to his past. I could listen and even tolerate him as my guest, if only the children were not passing to his care. He talks of "relieving" me of the burden.

"Don't hurry, old man," I answer casually, "they are no burden to me."

He gazes at me and lowers his eyes.

"I tell you, Randolph, you're a revelation to me. I never knew a man like you before. They don't make them like that these days."

"Praise from Sir Hubert," occurs to me, but I don't say it. I am in reality at his mercy, I suppose, but I often feel as though he were at mine. The glossing over of his atrocious conduct, the taking him at his word on the subject of his lapsed memory, which we either slur or don't refer to at all, seem to give me a tremendous advantage over him,—the commonplace advantage of simple honesty over mendacity. Not for a moment do I now believe in his lapsed memory story. I cannot deny, however, that his air is one of repentance and, as Dibdin has said, who in this world is so hard but he wouldn't give a fellow man a second chance?

Jim Pendleton, now that he has been to a New York tailor's, appears as impressive and debonair as ever. He must be in the middle forties and he is not ill-looking. It is chiefly his eyes that seem changed to me. Do what I will, I cannot look at them. There is a certain disturbing obliqueness about his gaze that makes me turn mine away in a sort of vicarious shame.

But, again, *C'est un mauvais metier que celui de medire.* And conscious of that truth, I mean to speak or think no more ill of Jim Pendleton. After all, his large contact with the world has given him something that I lack.

Last evening at dinner he was regaling us with an experience of his of spearing fish in the Marquesas.

"I was in the back of the boat," he was saying, "with a torch in my hand, and my islander, who was an expert at it, held his spear ready for the first fish that leaped. Several of them leaped and fell again into the water round us churning it up, so that we were wet with spray. Suddenly I saw a huge mass glistening in the torchlight, falling, it seemed, right on top of us.

"The native buried his spear upward in the thing as it

fell. I tell you that man was quick! But it was too late. The huge fish flopped into the boat with its great head on my knees and the full weight of his body on the man, sending him overboard and splintering the side of the boat. In just about a second we were in total darkness, floundering in the water, with an overturned boat. I was badly bruised and the native had both legs broken.

"In spite of his broken legs, however, he offered to swim ashore, to the nearest projecting rock. But I was sure he couldn't make it and very certain I couldn't. It was a job, I can tell you, righting that boat, helping that man into it and scrambling in myself; and then with a piece of splintered oar rowing ourselves in. The fellow with his broken legs worked just as hard as I did and never uttered so much as a groan. It did me up for some time. But that fellow was spearing fish again in ten days or so."

Jimmie, who is sometimes allowed to take his supper with us, sat gazing at his father, fascinated by the narrative until the last word. Then seemingly jealous that any one, even this strange father, should exceed me in prowess, his little face clouded and he demanded:

"Uncle Ranny, didn't you ever spear a big fish?"

"No, Jimmie," I laughed, "but maybe you and I will go there one day and spear some together."

"Well, anyway," he retorted stoutly, "you took us on a picnic."

Whereat we all laughed, albeit my own laugh was rueful. The thought flashed through my mind that Pendleton was certain to win them to himself the moment he decided to do so. The very memory of me would become ridiculous to them.

"Uncle Ranny," spoke up Laura, "has been too busy feeding us and buying us clothes to go traveling."

Alicia smiled radiantly at Laura across the table, and

Griselda, who had just come in with the dessert, nodded her head with somber emphasis as she placed the bowl before me.

I could have hugged them all three in gratitude, but nevertheless I pressed Pendleton to narrate more of his experiences.

"No," he shook his head, evidently taking the children's comment to heart. "That's yarn enough for one evening."

That seemed to me very decent of Pendleton.

I could not help laughing at Dibdin to-day. I called him up on the telephone and demanded what he meant by coming from devil knows where after more than two years' absence and virtually cutting me.

"Come to lunch at the Salmagundi Club," he growled.

"Does it pain you as much as that to ask me?"

"Don't be a damn fool," he retorted.

"Don't be so wickedly witty," I replied.

"At twelve-thirty," he muttered and hung up the receiver. From which I gathered that he was out of sorts.

In the hall of the Club where he was waiting, I greeted him with,

> "'Is it weakness of intellect, birdie,' I cried,
> 'Or a rather tough worm in your little inside?'"

He stared at me.

"How you can be so light and idiotic in the face of circumstances," he began, "passes my comprehension."

"Circumstances, my dear fellow, are all there is to life."

"Want to wash your paws?"

"No — I am as clean as I shall ever be."

I put my arm through his and allowed him to lead

me to a quiet table in the rear of the billiard room, softly illumined by a shaded lamp at midday.

"What a delightful place!" I exclaimed. "Residence of Q. T. tranquillity."

"Tranquillity be blowed," he grunted, as he sat down facing me. "What are you going to do about that Old Man of the Sea of yours?"

"You mean Pendleton?"

"Whom the devil else can I mean?"

"Why, nothing of course, but give him a leg up if we can. What else is there to do? I just received a letter this morning from an insurance company asking for confidential information about him. He's given me as a reference and they're evidently considering him."

"The Danbury and Phoenix?" he asked.

"Yes. How did you know?"

"I got one, too."

"I suppose we are really his only two possible sponsors at present."

"I'd as soon recommend a convict from Sing Sing," he muttered.

"Oh, no!" I protested. "Not as bad as that. Besides, sometimes you have to recommend even a convict."

"I'd much rather recommend a convict. I hate to lie about this man. I've been asked whether I would trust him and I have to say yes. But you know dashed well I wouldn't. Give me a cigarette," he ended savagely.

"I think he'll go straight now," I murmured dully, passing my case to Dibdin and looking away. "The children will no doubt have an influence on him."

"You judge everybody by yourself."

"How d'ye mean — myself?"

"The long and the short of it is," he declared, putting both elbows on the table, "I had no idea what the children would do to you."

"What did they do to me?" I queried, mystified.

"Made you over — that's all."

"Explain," I said, gazing at him stupidly.

"What is there to explain?" growled Dibdin, when the waiter was out of earshot. "You were always a decent sort of idiot — bookworm, muddler, dilettante, whatever it was — afraid of real life, fit only to collect pretty little books or old musty volumes that nobody really cares to read in — a drifter, with about as much knowledge of the problems of existence as a stuffed owl in a glass.

"What happened? Your sister's orphans come to you. You plunge into life, go into business which you detest, lose your money, go to work as a clerk, by George! You of all people! — Keep a roof over them, bring them up and hang me if I don't think you were idiotically happy in it all until I brought this Old Man of the Sea! — What right had I to pick him up and bring him and bungle it all? And why the hell didn't you warn me not to fetch him? I thought I was helping you out. I'd sooner have chucked the brute overboard — I would, by Heaven!"

For a moment I could reply nothing at all to Dibdin. His estimate and account of my actions were natural enough to him who, despite his burly manner, exaggerates everybody's qualities. It seemed the more remarkable that he who so firmly believed in the second chance should now find no word to say in Pendleton's favor. But I could see clearly enough that what troubled him was the pain he instinctively realized the departure of the children from me to Pendleton was certain to bring me.

"Why didn't you cable me, 'Lose the brute?'" he took up his argument.

"Because, my dear fellow," I put my hand on his arm across the table, "it was too late; once you had found

him and told him of what had occurred in his absence, it was too late. Would you like to live with the menacing uncertainty of him overhanging in space? Rather have him here and face him. Besides, the children are his" — I knew I must state my view squarely on that head — "If he is fit to take them, then have them he must, regardless."

"Regardless of you, you mean?" He put it darkly.

"Yes — regardless of me, certainly. I don't count."

"By the Lord!" and his fine head shot upwards in a gesture that was in itself invigorating. "D'you know you are twenty times the man you were?" he cried. "I couldn't have believed it. You — you're stupendous!"

I laughed and waved him away with a *"Retro, Satanas."*

"You're going it blind like that," he ran on, disregarding me, — "Salmon and Byrd," with a laugh — "losing all your money and then — Visconti's — slaving for the kids — meeting it all — by gad, you are living life! — heroic, I call it — I take off my hat to you!"

"Put it on again," I murmured, moved by his vehemence. It was certainly agreeable to hear such words from Dibdin, who never lied. Praise is a savory dish, not a thing that my misspent life has been surfeited with, and it was exquisitely soothing to one's vanity. But it was clear enough that Dibdin was wrong. His usually lucid view was obscured by the tangle of circumstances that weighed upon him. Naturally, I could not leave him in his error.

"If you knew," I managed to stammer, "the malignant fear that is eating my liver white, you — "

"Fear of what?" he broke in.

"Of turning those kids over to him;" I lowered my voice — "just that and — nothing else."

"Just that," he repeated gloomily, nodding his head.

"Who would have supposed it? By the Lord! If ever there was a bull in a China shop, I am that bull. Why the devil did I ever pick the brute up? Look here!" he flashed with sudden inspiration, "why not deport him as we imported him, eh? I might manage it — I might!"

"No — no, Dibdin — neither you nor I would do such a thing."

"Why not?" he growled.

"That would make us — worse than he is, or was," I explained sadly. For I must own that for an instant my heart leaped at his suggestion. "Besides," I went on prosily, "it's not so easy to lay a ghost when once you've raised it. We've got to believe him, Dibdin, my boy — if only for the young ones' sake. He will probably get his job, and the thing to do now is not to arouse his suspicion of how we feel about him. Believe everything he says — believe in him. Thousands every year, according to the newspapers, turn up willfully missing! He was tired of the humdrum life and lit out; that is all there was to it. Now he wants to try back. You yourself thought he ought to have another chance."

There was genuine pathos in old Dibdin's voice when he spoke out with a humid somber look:

"By George, that chap's the Nemesis of us all! By his one willful act of destructive irresponsibility he has affected all our lives destructively. It's maddening that one worthless brute should be able to do all that. He killed Laura, damn him; he orphaned these kids; he's upset your life — he makes wretched conspirators of you and me — g-r-r-r! I'd like to pound him to a jelly!"

I laughed joylessly.

"What would that undo?"

"Nothing, I dare say," snapped Dibdin. "Besides, you really have no complaint, boy. You *tower,* Ran-

dolph, my lad; yes, by George! you *tower* head and shoulders above any one I know! His very villainy has made you over — blown the breath of life into you."

I believe I answered something flippant.

"Look here!" he cried, with a sudden movement upsetting a glass of water and disregarding it. "If those kids go over to him, we can keep an eye on him — just the same — as though we were with them!"

"How d'you mean?" I queried, puzzled.

"That girl — what's her name — Alicia! She'll keep an eye on him — and them. She's sharp, I tell you, with her innocent blue eyes. Give you a daily report like — like —"

"No!" I emphatically interrupted him. "That, never! She is not going from my house — certainly not to him!"

I was the more abashed by my own vehemence when I saw Dibdin staring at me with lifted eyebrows.

"Why — you are not —" he began blankly — but I interrupted him hotly.

"I am nothing! — She is to me just as Jimmie and Laura and Randolph are, but they are unfortunately his. Don't you know the meaning of responsibility for young lives, Dibdin? I want to give her her chance, educate her, make a fine woman of her. They have a father; she has no one but me. I can't turn her out — and I wish," I added lamely, "I had as much right to keep them all."

"Whew!" he whistled in renewed astonishment.

"I can only say I don't know you any more. I used to know you, but I'm proud to make the acquaintance of the new Mr. Randolph Byrd."

"Don't be a damn fool, Dibdin," I mumbled in exasperation. "You know you are talking rot. Why the devil are you so interested in the kids? There is that cheque you sent —!"

"You haven't cashed it," he interposed, moving his shoulders as one shaking off something. "Why the deuce haven't you?"

"I will some day," I grinned at him feebly, "when I need it more. But you haven't answered my question."

I felt I was goading him brutally but for once I seemed to have the dear old tramp upon the hip. For all his gruffness he was as full of emotions as anybody. It seemed to me absurd for a man to hide his implanted instinct, one of the noblest of all the little hidden root-cellars of our instincts, under a false shame or indifference. Women are wiser — they don't hide theirs; and I had become shameless about mine.

"Why," I repeated, "are you so much interested in those kids?"

"Don't be an ass!" he grunted, looking down upon the wet tablecloth, and a spasm as of pain crossed his countenance.

"Ah, you see!" I laughed, attempting to lighten his mood.

"Randolph," he uttered in a strange solemn tone that sent a slight thrill through me. "I told you once there was a woman I had cared about — and only one."

"Yes — but you never married her."

"No," he continued in the etiolated tone of a dead grief. "She was married already when I knew her."

And then my sympathy went out to grizzled old Dibdin.

"I am sorry," I murmured, touching his hand across the table. "Did I know her?"

"Yes," he said quietly, "you knew her. It was Laura."

In a flash of poignantly bitter and vain regret I saw the vista of the dead years — of what might have been! . . .

CHAPTER XVI

MIRACLES — miracles are common as blackberries!

Pendleton is once again a faithful worker in the vineyard of the insurance company.

A commonplace miracle enough, but all miracles, I suppose, are commonplaces that happen to surprise us or that we don't understand.

The abstract office, I am sure, has more joy over one sinner that repenteth than over ninety and nine — but I do not wish to be blasphemous. Like Death, it claims us all in the end. A voluptuary, an idler like myself, or a renegade who broke from it indefensibly like Jim Pendleton — all, sooner or later — turn or return to its yoke like starved runaway slaves — the unrelenting office! What a change it must be to Jim after the beaches and the barrooms of the gorgeous East! But for one closely relevant circumstance I could find it in my heart to be sorry for him.

What a strange and wonderful institution is the family! Another of those commonplace miracles so charged with mystery, like birth and death. If I were a classical writer or a Sir Barnes Newcome I might expatiate at length upon the subject. The things we swallow and condone and cover up for the sake of its ties!

Suffice it, however, that Jim Pendleton is quietly working out his salvation, a salary and plans for re-creating his dismembered home.

The children are becoming quite used to him. Randolph seems to be the nearest to him and Jimmie remains

stubbornly farthest away. It is painful to think however that Jimmie's youth will the more certainly and completely detach him from me in the end.

When is it all to happen? I for one dare not fix the fateful day which, with every passing hour, draws nearer. No one fixes the day. It is left dangling in the air by an invisible thread of uncertain length and strength —

There are times when I could cry out in my anguish, my agony of nameless pain, fear, apprehension. But what a spectacle I should make of myself if I gave vent to emotion! We humans are not so much whited sepulchers as masked and silent volcanoes.

And Jim Pendleton — what is he thinking, feeling? He is suave, quiet, controlled. He is very gentle with them all, and particularly soft-spoken with Alicia. He has taken to consulting and confabulating with her touching the characteristics and the needs of the children. At times it seems to me that I cannot bear it and once at least I have called her and spoken harshly to her, and charged her with having mislaid a volume of *Book Prices Current.*

How childish on my part! But my nerves are not what once they were. They are tetchy and fractious. It has been decreed that I am to have a vacation and go away for a fortnight — go to Maine or New Hampshire. If I were to burst into laughter at the thought, I might end like an hysterical woman, in uncontrollable tears. I could no more go now than I could spread my arms and fly. I am as remote from the holiday spirit as from the North Star.

Poor Dibdin — how mistaken he is in me! He blathers of my "towering head and shoulders" — b-r-r-r! it makes me shudder with shame. What a weakling I am in the face of life!

No — I am a toiler in Bleecker Street, of its reeking

pavements, its fly-infested purlieus, where the Italian children grub and shout and sun themselves in the gutters, in the air of a thousand smells throbbing under the noonday sun. The homecoming to the third-rate suburb used to be refreshing and soothing like a delicate perfume. To see the children laughing and rosy in the square inch of garden, to see Alicia, sparkling with her young energy and enthusiasm, — it had all been like coming into a cool temple filled with shapes of beauty, after wandering in some fetid bazaar. Now it is dust and ashes. I could never convey to Dibdin or to any one else how alone I feel in the world, what chill and cutting blasts of desolation sweep into my life every time I think of its present or its future.

Minot Blackden came in to Visconti's at noon to-day to drag me out to lunch.

"Let's stop in at my studio for a minute," he proposed as he steered me round a corner. "Something for you to see."

He showed me a small rose window designed for some church in Cincinnati and turned expectantly to catch my exclamations. I gasped out some inanities.

"Art, my boy!" he gloated. "That's art for you!"

"It is, indeed!" I assented helplessly. "Only surprising thing is how a real artist can acquire so much fame. Seems to me I see something about you in every Sunday newspaper I take up."

"Ah, that's business instinct," he chuckled. "I am no amateur, I can tell you. I live this thing. You may think it insane, but sometimes I think I am Benvenuto Cellini reincarnated." He was not laughing; he was in deadly earnest. "Come in," he added solemnly, directing me to a door in the rear of his shop. "I want to introduce you to my press agent."

I was duly introduced to a plain bustling Mrs. Smith of perhaps thirty-five, who rose from a typewriter and spoke with a devotional, a reverential fervor of "our work", while casting worshipful glances at the artist. How do the Minot Blackdens inspire such adoration? I know I have rediscovered no lost art and it is plain I am no incarnation of Benvenuto Cellini. No one will ever worship me.

"Have you seen Miss Bayard lately?" Blackden inquired as we sat down to an Italian luncheon, beginning with sardines and red pepper.

"No — I haven't," I answered, surprised. "Do you know her?"

"Do I know her! Don't you remember introducing us in front of Brentano's?"

I had forgotten it, and it seemed to hurt him that I did not regard his movements and events with the devotional attention of his press agent.

"Of course," I murmured lamely. "You've seen her again?" He smiled a detached, superior smile such as the immortals might smile over erring, unregenerate humans, and ran his fingers through his dark, artistic hair.

"I see her quite often," he explained. "Very wonderful woman, Miss Bayard. She is a great inspiration to me in my art. My art has taken strides and leaps since I met her. Surprised you don't seize the opportunity of seeing her oftener — a truly artistic nature!"

"Ass!" I thought. But aloud I explained that domestic preoccupations left me little time for social or any other visits. The casualness of my answer seemed to brighten Blackden perceptibly.

I recalled, incidentally, that I had promised Gertrude, though heaven knows why, to let her know the upshot of Pendleton's return.

"Tell her, when you see her, that I am coming very soon. I've had a good deal on my hands. She will understand."

"She understands everything," murmured Blackden absently. "Ah, there is a woman! Yes, I'll tell her." And his eyes glowed in anticipation.

He was positively affectionate to me, this austere artist, when he left me at Visconti's door.

To come home, as I have said, used to be a delight. The presence of one person in it has changed it to a torment.

This evening when I approached my châlet on the rock, I found Pendleton in high good humor playing a game with the children on the lawn.

A flap of canvas, making a sort of pup tent, had been fastened to the tree for Jimmie, to give him that touch of savage life which even at Crestlands little boys seem to crave. Savage life at Crestlands! Yet once the Mohicans roamed here and the Mohican that is in all of us craves an outlet in Jimmie. It craved an outlet in me when I saw the great hulk of Pendleton squatting tailor-fashion in the tent entrance, enacting the rôle of cannibal chief. I stood unobserved for a moment, watching the scene with bitterness in my heart and shame on top of the bitterness.

"Bring the prisoner before me," grunted Pendleton in the character of the chief.

Tittering in suppressed glee, Randolph and Laura marched Jimmie up to Pendleton, who measured the child with a fearful frown and demanded where were the other prisoners.

"They escaped, your majesty," exploded Randolph with stifled laughter. "This white man alone dared to remain and brave your power!"

"He should be boiled and eaten by rights," Pendleton growled truculently. "He dares to face the Big Chief of the Cannibal Islands! Because of his great courage, however," he added as an afterthought, "we shall spare his life. Of such stuff great warriors are made."

"Beware, your Majesty," giggled Laura, "he might treacherously plan some harm to you. He is very brave, this white chief!"

"We see he is a desperate blade," answered Pendleton judicially. "But we admire bravery. He shall be our spear-bearer in battle."

"No, I want to be eaten!" shrilled Jimmie in his excitement, whereat the others shrieked and shook with laughter.

Alicia alone seemed moderate in her merriment. I hugged it to my heart that she appeared to look a shade sadly upon the scene. But I am probably wrong. I went indoors and sank my chin upon my hands with a turmoil of emotions which I wish to forget.

Pendleton is winning them, there is no doubt about that. In all the world there is not a soul who would cling to me, excepting possibly Griselda. Shakespeare never uttered anything truer than that life was "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

I wish I had never been born.

This morning I longed to romp and riot with the children, to shake off every atom of care, to laugh and roll on the floor with them, to be happy as I have been happy, but I could not. Held in the grip of a heartache that permeated every fiber in my body, I slunk sullenly away to my study after dinner to be alone. But even that I could not have.

Pendleton followed on my heels, lit a cigar and inquired whether he could have a talk with me. Naturally

I could not prevent it. I can prevent nothing, for I am no longer master in my own house.

"Old man," he began in his suave thick voice, which he means to be friendly, which to me seems orgulous with triumph. "Seems to me you're about due for a rest."

"What d'you mean?" I faltered, wincing, though inwardly I knew well enough what he meant.

"Just what I say," he smiled. "You have worked hard enough — supporting my family. Time I took the load off your shoulders — that's what I mean."

I waved my hand in a gesture of deprecation, but I could not speak.

"Oh, I know," he insisted doggedly, though even now he cannot look me in the eyes, "you didn't do it specially for me. You did it because you are a man — you — bah! they don't make 'em like you, as I've told you. But you don't want praise from me, I know that. You don't need it. What's more to the point is, it's time I took a flat or small house in one of the suburbs and had the lot of them move over and live on me for a while. About time," he nodded his head and shifted his cigar, "about time!"

Every word was a stab, but I steeled myself for the ordeal. Wasn't that what I had been expecting all this time?

"When — do you want to make the change?" I endeavored to speak crisply, as when I address the National City or the Guaranty Trust over the telephone at Visconti's.

"Well, I thought I'd begin to look round to-morrow. There'll be the place to find, some furniture to get — the installment plan will help — whole job ought to be fixed up in two or three weeks, I guess," he added with a laugh. "Uncle Ranny will have to come to supper pretty often to keep the kids as happy as we'd like to see them, eh?"

"But a going household —" I spoke quickly in a sort of last spasm of pitiful expostulation — "it's quite a — an undertaking to set going?"

"Yes — I know," he nodded soberly. "Don't think I don't know I'll have to push the wheel hard — with both shoulders. But d'you know," he lifted a confidential eyebrow, "that young woman — Alicia — will be a great help to me — quite a little housekeeper, she is — quite a kid — I hope Laura will take after her."

My heart was of lead. If he was watching my face, he must have perceived a deadly pallor sweeping every drop of blood away from it. There was a pounding in my ears like rushing waters.

"Alicia," I heard myself saying as one speaking after being rescued from drowning, "Alicia, you know, isn't my child — or yours. I can't send her to you. She — there are formalities — but, anyway, her wishes are a factor in the matter. I'll do anything, old man," my head seemed to swell suddenly and shoot upwards like a cork from an abyss, and my face was damp with perspiration — "anything, but I can't send that child to you unless — unless she is keen — you see that, don't you?"

"Oh, yes, I see — certainly." He was looking away as he spoke. I have a lingering hope he had not been watching my face. "That's all true, of course. But put yourself in my place, Randolph. Here are three motherless children. She, that girl, has been a kind of mother to them. Seems to have a born faculty for it. What would I do without her, just starting in like that — you understand!"

"Surely, surely!" I hastened to assure him, because I felt slightly more master of myself. "But you see my point — she doesn't belong to me. And even if she did — I can't just pass her about — it's a responsibility —

her wish — what I mean is, I can't coerce her in any way."

And suddenly I saw the children away from me, with this dubious, mysterious man, alone, and my heart was wrung with agony. With Alicia, at least — but, no! I could not acquiesce so completely.

"Coerce — certainly not," was his wholly reasonable comment. "I reckon a word from you would go a long way, though. But I see your point, Randolph, I see your point. Tell you what!" he began in a new tone. "Suppose we put it this way. I'll speak to her myself — I'll put it up to her — leave you out of it altogether, see? — leave it to her to decide — so you won't have to — you'll be neutral, you see? — What's the matter with doing it that way?"

A thousand devils within me moved me with all but irresistible force to jump at his throat, to stifle his words, to choke the beastly life out of him, to end the torment then and there. But I could not — I could not. I knew he was expressing by his words his sense of certainty that he could win over Alicia, as he had won the children — that I was helpless in his hands — that I was a weakling whom he was making the barest pretense of respecting — that he could strip my household of all I held dear with an ease so laughable that he could not even bother to ridicule me. And yet I could not rise up and strangle him.

As one in a vise, I sat for a moment chained by wild conflicting passions, and then — a strange thing happened. A feeling of nakedness, a sense of being stripped of everything like another Job, of being utterly alone in the world fell about me like an atmosphere. I felt deprived of everything, though not bereft. It was an odd feeling, a sort of involuntary renunciation of all that was my life in which yet I calmly acquiesced. I faced and

addressed Pendleton almost with tranquillity. Certainly I experienced a strange new dignity that was very soothing, very grateful, as water to the thirsty after battle.

"Very well, Jim," I heard myself saying quietly. "Go ahead your own way. That perhaps is best."

All that I remember is a gleam of triumph in his eye. No word of all his chunnering and maundering afterwards do I recall. He talked on, smoking, for perhaps four or five minutes and then he left me.

By myself I felt at once strangely heavy as a mountain and insubstantial as the shadow thereof.

CHAPTER XVII

AGAIN and again I have been told that I am a fool. But not even my dearest friends have called me mad.

Are the gods then really so anxious to destroy me? What have I done to deserve it?

This morning, after last night's interview with Pendleton, I saw Alicia — suddenly saw her as it seemed for the first time. And yet an overwhelming realization flooded me like a tidal wave that through countless ages she and she alone had been inexpressibly dear to me. She, the divine ideal I had been pursuing, catching fitful glimpses of in glades and forests, on mountain tops, in palaces, in fantastic surroundings, amid incredible scenes of a dim and ancient dream-life, more real than any reality — *she* was Alicia, this child Alicia.

And I am more than twice her age!

Nothing can come of it but misery and wretchedness for me. By no word or sign dare I convey such a thing to her or to any one else — to no one except these pale pages that receive my poor motley confidences with the only discretion I can trust.

She is dearer to me than all the worlds. Yet not only must I remain dumb but I must guard my every word, gesture, thought even, as never before.

In the midst of all else this is a catastrophe. Yet it overshadows and overbalances everything.

Let me disclose the truth by so much as a sign, and every act and motive of mine becomes abruptly suspect,

and I shall stand revealed for the immoral, shameful creature that I suppose I am.

I could face that, I believe, if there were any possibility — but there isn't.

I must hide and cover and conquer the feeling by inanition. But how can I, when she is so untellably dear and precious to me?

No, no! A thousand times no! I cannot let Pendleton try to inveigle her to leave me. No!

And all I have to do is to betray this garish resolution and my secret will be out, and all that I am and have done will stand forth as naked pretense and I shall appear stripped and manacled like a common criminal too good for the hangman.

And I have dared to judge Pendleton!

The time-honored remedy in fiction, when a man finds himself in love with any one he has no business to love is, I believe, to go away, to travel. How ridiculous that sounds to me. The only place I can go to is Visconti's. To Visconti's! And now I have come back from Visconti's and I cannot stay in the house.

I cannot stay in the house because Alicia is in it — and Pendleton!

Oh, he will have his way, I am sure! The Old Man of the Sea infallibly has. Why should the unscrupulous always have the advantage? I abhor to think of him.

It is Alicia that is filling my mind, my heart, my life. I have been trying to think of her even until yesterday as a child, and I know I have been deceitful. She is a woman — she is womanhood. I see her now in her radiance and every movement and gesture of her, every act, every glance speaks of the freshness and youth of life, of a supreme, a divine beauty. I have called her a child and I yearn to sink at her knees and cry out my anguish and my adoration. I am the child, helpless be-

fore her. Whatever I conceal, I cannot conceal what her going would do to me. It would shatter what remains of my life. And I suffered Pendleton yesterday to propose calmly that she go over to him — trafficking in Alicia! — and with Pendleton! It is stifling to think of. I must go out. But I cannot let any of them see me. I feel like a thief in my own house. The window — ah, I can slip out for at least a solitary hour under the stars!

I did not manage to get out under the stars after all. Just as I began to fumble with the screen Alicia asked leave to come in. No presence could have been more welcome to me, but the dark thoughts under which I had been brooding made me wince with pain as she entered. Nevertheless I contrived to greet her with almost normal cheerfulness.

"Uncle Ranny," she began hurriedly in an undertone, coming close to me, "is it really coming, then?"

"What do you mean, my dear?" I asked her, though such subterfuges are quite useless with Alicia.

"Oh, he's just been telling me that he has his eye on a flat near Columbia University in New York — that he expects to have it going by the time the schools open — hasn't he told you?"

"What else did he say?" I queried breathlessly.

"Nothing much — only he asked me whether I didn't think it was wise to get settled there as soon as possible. He is very nice to me."

"Is that all?" I breathed.

"Yes, that's about all — but isn't that enough?"

I smiled feebly and sank into my chair with immense relief.

I longed to draw her to me, to enfold her, to rest her head against my heart, to hold her close and to exclude thereby all black care and worry, all overhanging shad-

ows, all the threatening and looming clouds of existence — to make my world blissfully complete. But I am only "Uncle Ranny" to her — and I felt a shudder pass down my spine.

"And you, Alicia," I managed to say. "What did you answer?"

"Of course, I said that was true — what could I say? But oh, Uncle Ranny," she leaned toward me as she stood at my desk, "I am afraid, Uncle Ranny! They are ours — aren't they — I know he's their father, but I can't help feeling as though we were — handing them over to a stranger — Oh, I suppose I ought not say it — some one we don't know at all!"

And she burst into tears.

Blood and flesh could not bear it longer. I twitched and writhed in my chair for an instant, then I leaped up and threw my arms about her and strained her to me.

"My darling," I murmured brokenly, "and how do you suppose I feel?"

"I know," she sobbed and gently, very much as Jimmie or Laura might have done, she put her arms about me and nestled as though I were some one old and fragile for whom she had a deep affection — but that was all. Alicia's first embrace!

And then I knew also. She did not, I trust, for an instant suspect the bitterness of the cup I was that moment draining. But why should I expect anything else? The guilt in my own heart tells me enough — and too much — of exactly where I stand. Alicia is still a child. As yet evidently she did not even suspect that Pendleton was bent upon taking her also. Suppose I prevented that, then what of the other three whom, in another way, I love no less? My head was throbbing dizzily, my pulses were beating like drums. For me this was the supreme moment of anguish and sacrifice; the dark night of the

soul, that *noche oscura* that St. John of the Cross knows so well how to describe, that shakes one's being and changes one's life forever more. My lot seemed to be to sacrifice and break myself in final and complete renunciation, to drain my cup of bitterness to its uttermost dregs.

For a moment the world was as a shadow, swaying, airy and insubstantial. The cowled monk that is buried somewhere within me was suddenly uppermost and the life of the world seemed sordid and leprous, a deadly thing rotted with lusts and passions, a thing to run away from — that was pulling me into its sensual center. But only for a moment.

Then suddenly the blood surged to my temples, as Alicia lay in my arms, and the ancient cunning of a thousand male ancestors, of savage hunters and crafty warriors who died that I might live, swept into my thews and nerves and brain and I crackled with eagerness to fight for my own.

No! — I would not — could not give up all that I held dear. I would fight! I gripped Alicia's shoulders in a spasm of fierce joy and in a hoarse guttural voice that surprised her no more than it surprised me, I breathed out:

"Never fear, Alicia — it can't be! It won't be. He hasn't done it yet. I'll do something — I don't know what as yet. But give me time — a little time — I'll work it out. We'll fight if we must — but we won't give up tamely!"

Alicia's warm cheek against mine, though with a trust that can only be described as childlike, was reward enough for victory, let alone for this still empty challenge. But an irresistible, throbbing feeling of confidence tells me that something will happen — that I shall win!

Is it simply the confidence of a fool, and the surge of melodrama that is never very far from any of us? Possibly. But my blood still throbs and my muscles still crackle with the strange eagerness and lust for battle. It may be that the fragrance and the starry look of Alicia that linger with me yet, the sweet joy and pride of Alicia when she returned my good-night kiss before she left me, the affection with which she clung, the reluctance with which she went, all have something to do with this new accession of courage. But I do not comfort myself with vain things. Alicia happens to be a girl whose affections have never been pampered by any doting parents. If she looks upon me *in loco parentis,* that ought to be enough for me. It is not enough. And the pain of that leaves a barbed sting in my breast. But that wound I shall carry gladly — I shall wear my hair shirt like the girl wife of Jacopone da Todi — if only I can play the man.

The evening and the morning were a day — the first day of a new life, and what a day!

I went down in the train with Pendleton and briskly suggested that he need not hurry with his arrangements.

"I thought," said he, with a furtive, sidelong glance at me, "that my first duty was to ease you. I owe you too much already," he added, looking out toward the drabness of the Mt. Vernon right of way.

"It's only strangers and enemies that owe each other things," I countered easily. "Friends owe each other everything and nothing. There is no audit for such accounts."

He laughed out of proportion to the deserts of this lump of wisdom and exclaimed:

"You're great, Randolph — great!"

It was my turn to laugh, and I felt that I had the ad-

vantage of him. With the sixth sense, or the pineal gland, or whatever it is, I was conscious that he was a little afraid of me — and that did not damage my temper.

"Your experience in life has been so — peculiar," I told him, "that anybody would be glad to be of any service possible. And you must remember that Laura was my only sister. Tell me," I added conversationally, "don't you find the harness galling at times after all — you have been through?"

"Galling! Say, Randolph, those little machine people in their skyscraper beehives — cages — don't know what living is! — Freedom!" . . .

For the first time I had noted the light of spontaneity glowing in his eyes, and my heart bounded: I was about to hear a confession. But on a sudden he checked himself and looked away. "Of course," he added in a forced tone, "one has to face one's responsibilities. No — take it all in all, I am glad to be doing my share of the work and carrying my burden."

I knew he was lying. I knew that his first outburst was the true Pendleton; that the addendum was meant, as politicians say, for home consumption.

"Of course, of course," I muttered hastily, "but we're only human." And alternately I cudgeled my poor wits to stand by me and prayed to them as to deities to light my way.

This lawless spirit, Pendleton, I had a vague gleam of intuition, was repenting his return to the yoke of duty, to the restraints of civilization. What, then, was it that held him? It was not a suddenly developed conscience. Of that I was certain. There was a problem I must solve and solve immediately.

We parted with cordiality at Grand Central station and twenty minutes later I was one of those little machines functioning at Visconti's.

"I want a draft at thirty days," I was saying, "for ten thousand lire on Naples. Your best rate at that date." And with the receiver to my ear I heard a voice within me, independent of the telephone, whispering:

"Could it be that he too is bewitched by Alicia? — with all his roving and experience — or is it his sense of duty to his children?"

"Four ninety-eight," said the exchange man, Hoskyns, at the National City, and "four ninety-eight," I repeated after him automatically. "Can't you do better — at thirty days?" And the independent voice in my brain put in: "Perhaps I am hipped upon the subject of Alicia?" And so the morning wore on.

Gertrude, to my surprise and confusion, rang me up at eleven.

"Good morning, Ranny," she opened sweetly. "You haven't kept your promise, have you?"

"Promise?" I repeated dully. "What promise?"

"You said you would keep me informed about Pendleton's return. You haven't done it — have you?"

"But you have been away for the summer, haven't you?" I ventured desperately.

"Yes, and I am back," she murmured gently, "and still — better come and lunch with me to-day — don't you think so?"

If there's any one thing that my career as a business man has done for me, it is to implant in my heart a hatred for procrastination and shiftiness. I had no luncheon engagement, and yet I despairingly told her I had.

"Dinner," she answered, "would suit me even better."

"I ought to go home," I protested feebly, with a sinking instinctive feeling that I really ought not to resume such relations with Gertrude.

"We'll have an early little meal, at six-thirty," she smoothly ignored me. "Until then, good-by."

I clicked the receiver angrily for a moment, but Gertrude had hung up. Her high-handed manner irritated me, but that was her characteristic. We were more leagues apart, Gertrude and I, than ever she or I could travel backward. And though the results of our meeting seemed to be unsatisfactory to Gertrude, I must in justice to her admit that she is always an admirable hostess.

I had telephoned to my house that I was not to be expected to dinner, and when Griselda had dryly answered, "Ye don't know what ye'll miss," I thought with a pang that I knew more about that than she did. Gertrude's calm and comfortable atmosphere, however, her deep chairs and sofas and the air of excluding a disorderly world, were not disagreeable to one fresh from the filthy pavements south of Fourth Street. Could those junk shops, paper-box factories, delicatessen "garages" and machine shops be in the same world with Gertrude's flat, in Gramercy Park? Yet they were only a little more than a mile away, and those were my real world, my daily environment. Gertrude's flat was now foreign ground.

"Yes — goose of a man! — don't you see? What could be better? The man comes back anxious to reassume his responsibilities. You have had a Hades of a time, but you have done the square thing, acquitted yourself like a man and a hero. And now the little romance ends happily and everything is satisfactory and you are free again — what could be more delightful?"

The heaviness of my heart portended anything but delight, but I remained silent.

"Don't think I am being trivial, Ranny," she resumed with a more sober vehemence. "It was a wonderful thing to do. I feel I was wrong in what I advised in

the past. Your sticking to the children has done heaps for you — for your development, I mean — more for you than for them, perhaps," she inserted as a parenthesis with a laugh. "But don't be quixotic now. Everything's coming right in the best of all possible worlds. So don't go throwing a wrench into the machinery just because you've had the wrench in your hand so long you can't think what else to do with it!"

"I am not good at changes," I murmured gloomily. "I was catapulted from one kind of life into another by main force of circumstances. Now I don't feel I can stand being shot back into something else. The wear and tear, the strain is too great."

I will not deny that what I chiefly saw at that moment was a disruption that would rob me not only of the affection of the children of which I could not speak, but of Alicia, of whom I could speak even less.

Gertrude graciously lit a cigarette for me and sat down beside me. She herself, however, was not smoking.

"There is one change, Ranny," she began in a new and strange voice that was almost tender, "that would do you more good than anything else in the world — can you guess what I mean?"

"A trip abroad?" I fumbled uncertainly.

"No" — smiled Gertrude quietly laying her hand on mine, "I mean — marriage."

"Oh, my God!" I exclaimed in an agony of apprehension, and a cold perspiration bedewed my forehead. That was one thing I never had expected Gertrude to discuss with me again, even in the abstract.

I do not remember what I ate, except that the dinner was dainty and cool and exquisite. There was a dewy cup of something light and refreshing and Gertrude's frock was charming, her eyes were bright and there was a touch of color in her cheeks. She did little talking

herself at first, but pressed me to tell her all I could of Pendleton.

I told her. I told her of his coming, of his air of penitence, of his returning to the offices of the insurance company and of his present effort to reëstablish a home for his children. The only suppressions I was conscious of were any references to Alicia or to my own somber emotions on the score of the children. Otherwise I was frank enough, Heaven knows, for it is hard for me not to be. To the very end Gertrude did not interrupt me. Only when I had done she made one crisp, incisive comment with a faint smile that was merely a lift of the upper lip.

"The one thing I cannot understand, Ranny," she observed, "is your unreasonable skepticism."

"You feel you could trust such a man implicitly?" I demanded.

"Yes," was the firm reply. "If there is any one thing clear, it is that Jim Pendleton is genuinely penitent. Suppose that lost-memory story is all moonshine, as you and Dibdin seem to think. By coming back that way doesn't the man really display more character than if it were true? He really shows that if he's gone wrong he has the stamina to come right again — and that's a good deal in this wicked world, Ranny."

"I had not looked at it in that light," I muttered, disturbed.

"I know you haven't," she gave a triumphant laugh. "You couldn't be calm on the subject. You really are an emotional, high-strung romantic, Ranny, and I don't altogether blame you for being prejudiced. But any dispassionate person knowing the facts will tell you I am right."

"It would be difficult for me to feel dispassionate on the subject," I returned doggedly.

"Certainly it would," was her ready reply. "That's why I am glad I captured you. Some friend had to show you your own interest."

"My interest?"

"Ranny," she cried in a voice charged with purpose if not with emotion, — with an intense, a vibrating resolution that impinged like a heavy weight upon my senses. "Ranny — don't let's be children — we are too old for that. Let bygones be bygones. I'll humiliate myself before you. I — I love you, Ranny — " and her lips really quivered — "I have always loved you — will you marry me, Ranny?"

Her face seemed strange, transformed by the force of an irresistible, a final compulsion. I writhed under her gaze as one on a rack. She hung for a moment, her eyes glittering into mine, positively tremulous; I had never seen Gertrude so serious. I could not bear it. It was excruciating. I know Gertrude was not herself. I leaped from the sofa, her hand still clinging to mine.

"I can't — I can't, Gertrude," I whispered hoarsely. "Oh — I — wish — but I am horribly sorry — I can't!"

Gertrude's nerves are strong and her control over them is stronger. She gazed at me for an instant, intently, searchingly, dropped my hand and turned away.

"There is some one else," she murmured in level tones to herself; "there is some one else now."

"Yes," I breathed, "though it won't — it can't — " and I paused.

"You needn't tell me," she turned, smiling harshly. "I know — it's that girl — the gutter-sni — but it doesn't matter. Every man is a fool — and you are the least likely to prove an exception. Oh, I always knew that — felt it — but never mind. I can't humiliate myself any more, can I? — Ranny," her voice suddenly struck a quieter note. "One thing I must ask for our

old friendship's sake: You will forget this — episode — will you not? And I shall try to."

"My dear Gertrude — " I threw out my hands in a gesture of helplessness. If there was any humiliation it was I who was suffering it. She looked at me calmly, stonily. The color in her cheeks was exactly the same as before. Had Gertrude stooped to rouge?

"Your dear Gertrude — yes; then that's all right. Have a drink before you go? No? Very well. You will remember some day that I have given you my best — done my best for you."

It seems inherent in the nature of woman, so cosmic is the sweep of her outlook, or else so near to the earth, that when her desires are frustrated she feels the laws of the universe are frustrated. I did not make this comment to Gertrude, however; I could only murmur an entreaty for her forgiveness — which she ignored. Her only answer was a brief hard gesture of the head, a sort of jerk that expressed at once futility, contempt and dismissal.

As one dazed and paralyzed I must have made my way somehow downstairs, into a street car or some other conveyance at Fourth Avenue and into the babel at Grand Central station. But of this I have no recollection whatsoever. It is a blank. I must have walked like a somnambulist. I never came to until I left the train at Crestlands about a quarter past nine, and the first thing I was conscious of was the pain I must have inflicted.

CHAPTER XVIII

I CAN write this almost calmly now because so much has passed since that dreadful evening and details begin to emerge cloudily from the fog of that confusion.

I remember striking out homeward from the station down our drably progressive suburban Main Street, following the bumping, grinding, loitering trolley across the little bridge over a stream that sends up a dank, fishy odor, though all the living things I have ever seen in its neighborhood were mosquitoes and water snakes.

Over the rusty iron parapet I stood leaning for a few minutes and the original thought feebly stirred my dazed brain that life was not so much a dream — as the Spaniard Calderon would have it — as it is a stream. There is no knowing what it may not bring upon its bosom.

"That's it," I muttered to myself aloud. "Life is a stream within a dream."

"That's about the size of it," gruffly remarked a passing laborer behind me, his dinner pail clanking against his side, and he burst into a hoarse guffaw.

I laughed too, and concluded that I was still maudlin at the end of my perfect day.

I left the bridge and the highway, turned to the right and began to climb the ill-lighted crooked street, anciently a Dutch cattle track, no doubt, that leads to my isolated châlet upon the rock.

With all geography, history, the visible and invisible universe to draw upon, the fathers of Crestlands had denominated this obscure street Milwaukee Avenue.

Milwaukee Avenue put the last touch to my nightmarish state. A sickly laugh escaped me as I bent my back to the ascent.

A young mounted policeman, who rode like another Lancelot by this remote Shalott, interrupted his tune long enough to give me a cheery greeting and rode on humming to himself.

The September evening was mild and I vaguely purposed walking past my house and strolling about for a bit before I went in. It was early for returning from dinner in town, and I was not overanxious to encounter anybody. A sudden sense of something eerie and awesome came to me as I looked at that deeply shadowed cottage. It appeared unfamiliarly remote, detached, and I gazed upon it with a weird sense of foreboding that sent a slight shiver down my back. The window shades of the châlet were drawn with only their rectangular lines of light showing through, — light, I reflected bitterly, by which Pendleton was no doubt beguiling Alicia to desert my house and follow him.

This thought lodged like a barb in my heart and my feet suddenly turned to lead. I could not go on farther and irresistibly I felt myself drawn homeward.

The somber habit of my recent reflections urged me with a plausibility strange and inexplicable to enter my study by the window instead of the comparatively public door. The window nearly always stood open. In case of storm Griselda or Alicia would dash about the house and close the windows, beginning always with my study. But this day had been clear.

I tiptoed around through the garden to the side upon which my study window gives. From it the land slopes away under a covering of trees until it reaches the stream.

There was a light in the study, though the shade was

drawn, flapping gently against the rusty wire screen. This shade, as it happens, does not quite fit. It is short a full half-inch on either side, so that the peering observer can see as much as he pleases of what is going on in that room when it is lighted.

Automatically, without any premeditation that I can now recall, I gazed into my own room like a prowling thief. The picture I saw riveted me to the spot with an irresistible magnetic force.

Alicia was reclining on my leather couch, seemingly asleep. Instinctively I knew that she had decided to wait up for me and with some book in her hands had nodded in her vigil. It was still early, but Alicia's day began early and was always charged with activity. What an exquisite picture she made as she lay there in her thin frock, with a look of childlike trust and unconsciousness — radiating beauty.

Pendleton, who at that moment entered the door of the study, possibly to find Alicia, stood for a few moments spellbound by the picture, even as I stood outside. My burglarious entry was now frustrated. I must make use of the door. But I could not move from the spot. Somehow I could not let Pendleton out of my sight.

How dared he look at her in that manner!

My nerves were suddenly tense and my muscles quivering. Strange unfamiliar thoughts of savage acts, of sudden violence, of thrusts and blows, of blood-lust seethed and bubbled within me like a lurid boiling pitch. The inhibitions and restraints of a lifetime, however, held me writhing as in a vise.

I turned away for a twinkling as though to gather resolution from the murmurous night.

On a sudden, as I peered again eagerly, I saw Pendleton's great hulk bending over her, with a look peculiar

and intense, with a strange speculation in his eyes that froze me. His huge hands were spasmodically, irresistibly hovering as if to embrace her delicate unconscious shoulders. Before I knew it he was kissing her cheek and it was I — I — who felt his hot vile breath as though Alicia's face and mine were one!

I cried out in a torment of fury and pain, but only a hoarse distant sound as of some night bird issued out of my parched constricted throat.

I rattled the sash violently, seized the screen and ripped it out, tearing my hands with the cheap twisted screen frame, though I was unaware of it then. The thin opaque shade flapped defiantly in my face. And all at once I heard a piercing scream — the terrified voice of Alicia!

Rage maddened me. And because of my state, I experienced difficulty, this time of all times, in entering the window out of which normally I stepped with ease. I stumbled, slipped, fell, rose again and leaped into the room like a maniac.

But Griselda, drawn by Alicia's scream, no doubt, was already filling the doorway, facing Pendleton, and with a look of concentrated hatred that remains engraved in my memory she was saying:

"Ye blackguard! Ye vile, black-hearted blackguard!"

With a wild leap to my table I seized a pointed bronze paper cutter. I should have plunged it into his heart, but for the swift intervention of the aged Griselda.

"No!" she cried huskily, seizing the blade, "we need nae add murder to this!"

I dropped the paper cutter to the floor and threw myself at the purple throat of the beast Pendleton. For a moment the guilty hang-dog look left his eyes and with an oath he thrust out his open hands against my face

to throw me off. I was blinded by his huge hot palms against my eyes but I clung convulsively to his throat. His hands spasmodically closed about my neck; a momentary blackness fell upon me but I clung, my fingers eating more savagely into the hateful flesh of his throat. The pent-up force of years of hostility was that instant in my destroying hands. He gurgled and gasped and reeled backward.

In the meanwhile Alicia, emerging from her bewilderment and realizing the scene enacting itself with lightning-like rapidity, gave a low cry and sat up, moaning with terror. This vision of Alicia recalled me to myself. I flung his head away from me and I myself staggered backward with the force of my effort. I was breathing like a wrestler as I stood leaning with one hand upon the table. I could not speak.

My desire was to fold Alicia in my arms, to press her to me, exulting in her safety. But I dared not move for fear I should topple and fall, with the sheer working of the rage that was tearing me.

"Go — Alicia!" I gasped out finally. "Upstairs. Leave us!" Dead, banal phrases, when I panted to pour out endearments!

With a look of wild anxiety from Pendleton to me, like a terrified doe, Alicia rose, stood for a moment irresolute, then suddenly throwing up her hands to her face, she ran out of the room with a piteous stifled cry.

We stood for a space silent, all three of us, Griselda, Pendleton and I, after the door had closed.

"Now, Pendleton," I said finally, when I was a little more sure of my voice, "nothing you can say will matter in the slightest. We saw. Question is what d'you mean to do?"

He glanced hostilely toward Griselda. She, interpreting his look, flashed defiantly, with arms akimbo.

"Look, ye villain, look your fill. I will na leave the master alone with a murderer, the likes of you! No, I will na!" How often I have wished since then that she had not been so zealous.

"Talk about murder!" Pendleton, with the ghost of a grin, pointed at the paper knife still clutched in Griselda's hand.

"You needn't be afraid on my account," I told Griselda quietly. "I don't fear him."

"I will na go away," obstinately retorted Griselda, moving forward, pushing Pendleton aside like a man, and placing her back against the door.

"Very well, Griselda," I said. "I have no secrets to hide from you. And this man has betrayed what he can never hope to hide. Pendleton, what do you mean to do?"

"Do—" muttered Pendleton, with a dark abstraction in his look, "I'd like to tell you what I'd like to do to such as you—but it isn't worth while. This namby-pamby, mollycoddle, rotten doll-life favors you. Do! If I had the money, I'd get so far away I couldn't even think of insects like you."

"Then you realize you are no more fit to take Laura's children than you're fit to live among decent people?" He was silent for a moment, with the abstraction merging into cunning in his eye, and that in turn, as though cunning were of no avail, fading into heaviness.

"They'll become like you," he finally answered with the somber trace of a sneer. "There's the oldest boy—I wish—I'd make a man of him." A snort of derision from Griselda interrupted.

"You mean a criminal," I put in, in spite of myself. "Well, you can't, Pendleton. Lift a finger and as surely as you sit there, I'll prosecute you—children or no children. Don't forget I have witnesses."

He gazed at me open-mouthed with half-defiance, half-alarm on his moist fleshy countenance.

"That's your little scheme, is it?" he muttered sardonically.

"Only if you drive me to it!"

"Blackmail, eh?"

I laughed at him. "What's the use of being melodramatic, Pendleton? You are hardly the one to talk like that."

"Where's the money Laura left?" he snapped with truculent sharpness, and I experienced a pang of pain to hear her name upon his lips. Nevertheless, I answered him evenly:

"That exists intact — about nineteen hundred dollars. It's the children's, unless I should need it for their education. I am the executor."

"Give me a thousand of that!" he cried passionately, yet with a tentative uncertainty in his voice, "and I'll go where I'll never see your face again!"

"That's a consummation, Pendleton — but of that not a penny!"

"Executor!" he repeated with vicious bitterness — "with your little laws and safeguards. God! How I hate you all! God! To be again where real men are — who move — and laugh — and live! Peddling molly-coddles — caged white mice! Damn you! I wish to God I had never met any of you!"

"You don't know how often I have wished that," I murmured, but he paid no heed.

"Lord! I want to be again where the sun shines, where a man can take a chance! I wish to God I had never met that moldy old rotten Dibdin! I was going into the commission business with an Englishman at Osaka — or I could have gone into one of the mines of Kuhara in Korea — copper — made a fortune!" — he

spoke as if he were vehemently thinking aloud — "but that plausible rotter Dibdin came along — dragged me away — and I had a hankering for the lights of Broadway. Broadway! What have I seen of it? Want to put me in a cage — in a flat! Hell, man! Give me a thousand dollars — and let me — I'll pay it back!"

I did not laugh at his last words. His mention of Dibdin suddenly brought to my mind what was like a flash of light. To be rid of him was my paramount desire. Dibdin — Dibdin's check — *to be used for the children!* It lay yellowing in my pocketbook. Now if ever was the time. Never, I felt certain after Pendleton's confession, could I benefit the children more with a thousand dollars!

"Yes!" I cried explosively. "I understand you, Pendleton. I'll give you a thousand dollars. You don't belong here — it was a mistake bringing you — go where you came from — where you'll be at home." It was only afterwards I recalled that he had mentioned blackmail.

"You'll give it to me?" he exclaimed avidly, thrusting out his hand.

"Yes — I will!"

"Now?"

"To-morrow morning." His face fell.

"Some trick? You'll go back on it." I ignored him.

"But you can't sleep here," I went on. "I'll meet you in town anywhere you say. No, I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll come with you to town now, to-night. To-morrow morning we'll settle it."

To be rid of him — to get him out from under this roof — seemed suddenly a great, a priceless boon.

"God! I could kiss you!" he cried in derisive exultation.

"Go pack your things," I said, through the tumult in

my brain. "I'll call a cab — or better still, you telephone Hickson, Griselda. I'll go and help him."

Pendleton nodded with grim insolence and shouldered out of the door.

"A better night's work ye've never done in your life," flashed Griselda, with a look of approbation that pleased me as much as any praise I have ever received; and she shuffled out to the telephone.

For one moment of silence I stood alone in the middle of my study, throbbing with a jumble of half-formed thoughts and racing flashes of ideas upon none of which my mind was able to fasten. But this single fact finally emerged from the welter: It was I, by my own act, who was now sending the father of Laura's children into exile. But on the heels of that came the certain conviction that never had any judge since justice was invented made a more accurate decision. And it seemed to me then as though something new and massive and stubborn and hard was born in my bosom that solidified and toughened me: That, come sorrow or joy, I should be able to present a surer front to their encounter, a greater certitude in meeting them. I felt myself at last an active, fashioned and tempered part of the machinery of life, and all my past seemed as chaff that had been blown by the winds of circumstance.

Alicia! My heart cried out for her! But I could not go to her now. I must clean my house for her and when next I saw her it should be in a cleared and wholesome atmosphere that no longer reeked of Pendleton. I made my way to his room and opened the door.

"Have you packing space enough?" I asked him coldly.

"I could use another suit case," he muttered.

"I'll give you mine," I told him and brought forth my bag from a closet in the hall. Whether Alicia had

heard any or all of our words I could not tell. The children were evidently sleeping. I walked on tiptoe.

"Where d'you intend to go?" growled Pendleton, without looking at me.

"To an hotel," I told him curtly — "any hotel you like."

"Go to the Hotel de Gink for all I care," he muttered and went on with his packing.

"Do you want to see the children before you go?"

I could not forbear asking him that. He paused for a moment and straightened up, breathing heavily. Then he shook his head. "No — I guess not."

The tin taxicab was rattling at the door, and Griselda came futilely to announce it.

"You'll hear from me to-morrow morning some time," I whispered to her quickly, as Pendleton, stooping under his bags, lumbered on in front of me. "Look after Alicia — and the others."

"Ay," she murmured, "have no fear."

There was a train, and in the longest half-hour of any journey we were at the Manhattan Hotel. Adjoining rooms were assigned to us with a bathroom between. There had been a sort of intoxication about the entire business that had carried me on with a blind nameless force as one is carried in a dream. Once I was alone in the four walls of the impersonal chamber, a sudden lassitude fell upon me, followed by an immense wave of dreariness. How somber and sinister was life, full of a drab and hidden tragedy. Trafficking with Pendleton — slaving at Visconti's — the dreams that had been mine! And this was the life I was living. Suppose in the morning he should refuse? On a sudden my door opened and Pendleton's hatless head appeared.

"Sure you won't back out in the morning?"

And again my nerves snapped back into their steel-like tension.

"Not even doomsday morning."

"Will you have a drink on it?"

"No," I told him, "but there is no reason why you shouldn't have one."

"I think I will," he said, and with a malign gleam of triumph he approached the telephone in my room.

"The bar!" he demanded, and when the connection was made he added: "Two rye highs for 436." Then he turned his face toward me and grinned.

"Now, Randolph," he began quite amicably, "why keep me here any longer than you can help?"

"What d'you mean?"

"This: It's only about half-past ten — quarter to eleven. There is — there must be a train for the West round midnight. Why prolong the sweet agony of parting — why not let me go?"

"Now? You must be crazy!" I exploded nervously. "How can I get the money for you? Besides, there's another thing — I want you to sign something — something a lawyer must draw up — a paper of some sort — so you can't repeat this business."

"So that's it — is it?" he nodded his heavy head up and down, as though thinking aloud. "Well, put that out of your mind. I'll sign nothing. Take me for a fool? Here's your chance. Give me the money now and let me go or the deal's off. See? I'm just as anxious to go as you're to have me go. But I wasn't born yesterday. I'll sign no papers in any damn lawyer's office. Take it or leave it. That's that!"

There was something unspeakably horrible to me about sitting there and chaffering with this man whose every word breathed contamination. For a moment the thought of Dibdin came to me. I would call upon Dib-

din in this emergency. Dibdin had hardly been near me of late. Excepting for an occasional luncheon together or a sporadic telephone conversation, I had scarcely seen him. It was as though he dreaded to encounter the monster Pendleton, whom in a sort he had himself brought into being, and was only waiting until I should be free of him. But somehow I could not then call Dibdin. This was *my* crisis and my mind revolted at dragging any one else into it. Oddly enough it was not the children that seemed to be the barrier, but Alicia. The picture of Pendleton obscenely hovering over her came scorching before my vision and I at once dismissed the thought of calling upon Dibdin. The club, — that was my one chance of getting cash at that hour.

"What's the matter with your club?" Pendleton snapped me up so suddenly that I was startled. Could that fleshy brute read my thoughts?

"Just what I was thinking of," I murmured excitedly and snatched up the telephone. "Give me 9100 Bryant."

"Damn it — you're a sport! I like a dead game bird like you."

When the club answered, I asked whether Mr. Fred Salmon happened to be in and was informed that the doorman thought he was and that he would page him. I sat waiting with the receiver to my ear.

"Tell you what I'll do," said Pendleton, under the stimulus of expectation. "If you pull this off for me so I can start to-night, while the mood's on me, I'll sign any damn thing you please."

"Hello!" I suddenly heard in Fred Salmon's deep voice, "Salmon speaking."

"Fred," I told him, "this is Randolph Byrd."

"Hello, Ranny!" he broke in exuberantly. "Well, of all the ghosts — " but I checked him.

"— I want to cash a check for a thousand dollars

right now, Fred. I am at the Manhattan Hotel. The banks are closed. Will you do this for me: Ask at the office and turn out your pockets and get what you can from any of the card players there and anybody else you know. Do you follow me?"

"I get you all right — all right —" said the voice of Fred, hardening to a businesslike tone now that money was in question. "Hold the wire a minute, Ran. I'll see what I can do."

Fred's raucous voice was as plainly audible to Pendleton as it was to me.

"Get it," he muttered. "Get it. I'd hate to wait till to-morrow."

I nodded. To be rid of him to-night would be a vast relief. And I longed to return home.

"I guess we can fix it all right," came Fred's voice in the telephone. "But you'd better come over with the check. There's about six hundred dollars in the club till. I have a couple of hundred with me. And we can raise the rest."

Pendleton heard him.

"Go ahead," he said. "I'll fix up about a berth with the head porter in the meanwhile."

"What's the big idea?" was Fred's greeting, as I entered the club.

"Private," I told him laconically. "Sending a man to the antipodes because he's unfit to live in this climate."

"Oh — sick man?" Fred was sympathetic.

"Very sick," I told him. "Incurable."

Fifteen minutes later I was in the hotel, handing Pendleton the money.

"Now what d'you want me to sign?" he queried carelessly.

"Not a thing," I answered. For on a sudden the futility of holding Pendleton to any bond overwhelmed

me. Any respite, even a few weeks from his presence, seemed a paradise. Paradise seemed cheap at a thousand dollars. And who can safeguard paradise? Besides, if I knew my man at all, it would be some time before he would return to an environment he so thoroughly loathed. I was no more safe with his signature than without — and no less.

"That's about all, then," he said, and he had the decency not to hold out his hand. "Good luck," he added in an undertone.

I made no answer and turned my face away from him with a wonderful sense of relief.

No sooner had the porter bustled out with his things and the door closed than I looked toward my own small bag with the dominant thought of returning home. But I could not move. I found myself shaking like a leaf and I sank down in the nearest chair, quivering as though the vibration in my nerves would hurl my body to pieces. No, I could not go home in this state. And taking off my coat with hands that shook as in a palsy, I threw myself upon the bed. But before I passed into the sleep of stupefied exhaustion a single insistent foreboding kept dully throbbing through my brain.

"He will come back — Pendleton will come back!"

CHAPTER XIX

EXULTATION filled me when I awoke late in the morning.

Though I had slept in my clothes and felt particularly disheveled, I stripped with the joy of an athlete after a victory and plunged into the cool invigorating bath.

Pendleton was gone! I do not remember the emotions of Sinbad when he had rid himself of the Old Man of the Sea. But his emotions must have resembled mine. My heart sang, I sang myself. I was manumitted. I was free. To my intimate journal may I not say that I felt myself a man?

I had fought the beast at Ephesus, my pulses blasphemously and jubilantly informed me, and by the Lord, I had won!

The children were mine! Alicia was mine! Would that I could bind them to me with triple brass. But I have bound them. In ridding myself of Pendleton, I had made them securely mine. Suppose he should return one day? They would be grown — reared by me. He would be merely the family skeleton. What is a family without a skeleton? He was that now. He wouldn't matter. It is human destiny to revolve about the child, about children. With the exception of Pendleton the outcast and Gertrude the — well, Gertrude — every one attained completeness only in rearing the next generation. And as I rubbed my body with the coarse towel I felt complete!

As for Alicia — ah — well, who was I to expect from life *everything?* At any rate she was mine, now, even

as the children were mine. And the very first thing I would do — oh, jeweled inspiration — is to adopt her, legally and formally. That thought suddenly made the blood sing in my ears to so delicious a tune that absurdly, ridiculously, I began like some pagan or satyr to dance about the room. *Mine, mine, mine!* I danced into the room in which Pendleton had not slept and with crazy gestures made as if to sweep his memory out of the garish window. I had saved the children and safeguarded Alicia.

I felt I had played the man. And let no man say he has lived until he has fought for those he loves. Inevitably my mind dwelt upon Alicia. Who is that child? What were her beginnings? Did she come out of the sea and chaos of life only to vanish in some bitter poignant dream like that of last night? I only knew that she was mine now and that I would bind her to me yet more strongly. I would not ask for too much; I would be humbly grateful. She had come into my life as a divine offering and I would not question overmuch. There is no other origin. I felt supremely, tremulously content. If only she would abide and never leave me!

And it occurred to me, as I stood shaving before the mirror, that life is a beleaguered city, with deadly arrows falling over the wall, and the great enemy, death, certain to enter in the end. But by virtue of the love implanted in the human heart, one may snatch many hours of happiness amid the tumult and the shouting in the winding ways.

Over my hasty breakfast I recalled with a shock of guilt that I had not yet communicated with Griselda. But as I was already late I decided I should call her from the office.

How swift is mischief to enter in the thoughts of des-

perate men I discovered bitterly only a few minutes later.

For the first word I received upon entering Visconti's was that Griselda had called me repeatedly and Griselda's news chilled and numbed every fiber in my body.

Alicia had disappeared!

Pendleton! That was the thought that seared my brain.

"You — don't think" — I stammered brokenly to Griselda, "that she — that Pendleton — "

"I have thought of that," was her reply. "But — no! It canna be possible. She hated him — no! She must hae gone before ye left the house. I looked into her room soon after and she wasna there. I thought the girlie was hiding somewhere — or maybe she had run out into the garden until the mischief should blow over. I looked high and low; I called her in the garden. But she was nowhere to be found."

"Did she take any things?" I queried huskily.

"A wee bundle — " said Griselda — "night things and the like."

The shuddering dismay of that moment I shall never forget.

"Did she talk with — with *him* at all during the evening?" The words struggled out of my parched throat in spite of me, and I should have hated to see my own eyes.

"Ay," said Griselda, "that he did, the leper! All the evening he was wheedling her to come to him with the bairns when he set up his house. She was weeping sair to me in the kitchen afterward. It was to ask you if you wanted her to go that she waited for you in the study — and fell asleep, the poor maidie!"

"And what did you say to her?" I all but whispered into the mouthpiece.

"I told the lass not to greet," shouted Griselda. "I

told her I could nae believe it would happen. He would never take the bairns. And if he did he would nae keep them. He was a bad one — the evil brute! But she was frightened, the puir lassie!"

"Very well, Griselda," I muttered stonily. "I must think. I shall call you a little later. Don't alarm the others."

She hated him, had said Griselda! There was a meager ray of comfort. But do what I would, my stunned mind continued to flutter heavily like a half-scorched moth around the ugly, sinister vision of Pendleton. Could he be at the bottom of Alicia's disappearance? How had he contrived the trick? If only I had gone to the station with him! Was it that that accounted for his hurry to be gone? No! It was impossible. Ought I to start in pursuit at once? No, no, no! I could not believe it. It could not be — not of her own free will! Yet my heart was lacerated by the possibility. When I lifted my head from my bosom, I gasped in a desolation of emptiness.

I had stifled the prompting to call Dibdin last night, but now I felt I must find him. I needed the solace and advice of a friend. I rose heavily and put on my hat. Visconti had not yet come in.

"Tell Mr. Visconti," I said to Varesi, my young understudy, "that I have been called away suddenly, on a serious private matter. I shall telephone him later."

"Yes, Mr. Byrd," responded Varesi, his lustrous Italian eyes flashing sympathy. He thought, no doubt, from what he must have overheard, that some rascal had run off with my younger sister — a killing matter, very possibly, to a properly constituted male. Had he known the truth, his Latin mind would have been shocked at my seeming Anglo-Saxon composure. Out of doors I heaved a deep sigh and boarded a north-bound elevated

train for the eighties, where Dibdin has his lodgings, near the Museum of Natural History.

I found Dibdin not at his lodging but at the Museum, directing the rearrangement of the Polynesian section in the light of his additions to it.

He turned one intense glance upon me without speaking, hurriedly gave some directions to the men at work, and led me to an alcove where there was a bench.

"Now, let's hear—" he said. "What's he been doing?" He concluded at once that Pendleton was at the bottom of whatever wild appearance I must have presented.

Briefly, but without omitting any essential detail, I gave him an account of all that had happened the previous evening, including Griselda's announcement of the morning.

"And you think he enticed her to go off with him?" he demanded.

"Well — what do you think?" I queried.

"I think no," said Dibdin. "What does Griselda say?"

"She says Alicia hated him."

"Then take her word for it!" snapped Dibdin. "But why the devil didn't you call me last night from the Manhattan?" he turned upon me angrily.

"Why didn't I?" I murmured. "Maybe it's because you've done enough — maybe it's because there are some things a man wants to do without assistance."

Dibdin glanced at me sharply and gave a low whistle.

"Oh, that's it—" he muttered — "I see," and he looked away.

I am certain that at that moment Dibdin read my secret. For his expression swiftly changed. He grew suddenly warm and friendly, more than his usual self.

"A fine job you did there, Randolph," he cried, clap-

ping my shoulder; "an excellent piece of work. I certainly admire your technique. As for Alicia — she didn't go with him — of that I feel sure!" I could have groveled before him in gratitude for those words.

"But where do you suppose she is?" I could not help eagerly asking. There was a gleam of amusement mingled with the sympathy in his eyes.

"Not very far, I imagine. We'll find her. Have no fear. Young girls are funny things. The instinct of sacrifice and the instinct of independence are always struggling in a woman like the twins in Rebekah's womb. When they're young it hits them very hard. Some notion like that must have swamped Alicia — sacrifice — earn her own living — ceasing to be a source of trouble — who knows? They don't think when they're young — or even when they're old. They *feel*. We'll find her — but *we've* got to *think*. Pull yourself together, old man."

"How," I asked in stupefaction, "do you come to know all that about women?" And my heart felt perceptibly lightened at his words.

"Oh, I've been studying them all my life," he laughed. "Never having had one of my own, I've been watching and thinking about the whole sex all over the earth. We'll find her. Have you communicated with the police?"

At the word "police," my heart turned leaden again.

"The — p-police!" I stammered aghast. "Invoke the publicity that means? — Horrible!" A shudder ran down my back.

"Right again!" cried Dibdin, nudging me. "Young man, you have an appreciation! Quite useless — the police. But you still — have a suspicion of Pendleton, haven't you?" I found myself wishing that even the best of men weren't so ready to imagine themselves

amateur detectives. The very core of my heart of hearts, Alicia, had disappeared, and I wanted swift concrete help, not speculative questions.

I admitted that I had a lingering suspicion of Pendleton.

"Then, this is what we do," Dibdin rubbed his forehead as over a problem in chess. "We see a private detective agency here and acquaint them with the facts. Have them pick up Pendleton on the way — he hasn't reached Chicago yet, you know — and see if he's traveling alone. If he is, let him go on his way. If not — then, a description of the girl — you understand — "

A livid fury possessed me suddenly as I saw the all too vivid picture that Dibdin had evoked and was now trying to believe.

"No, no!" I cried. "I am going myself. I dare not — I cannot trust anybody else to do this. You don't know — you can't understand — "

"I know only too damned well," growled Dibdin staring at me quizzically. "But I am trying to show you sense — difficult, I admit, to one in your condition. However, I must try again," he went on with the patience of resignation.

"You are only one man — don't you see? A detective agency is an organization of many men in different places who can concentrate on the same job simultaneously. At this minute they would know on which train he might be traveling and some one or several could already be watching for his arrival. Suppose they miss him. There are many hotels in Chicago — there are many trains leaving for the coast — don't you see? "

"Yes," I breathed brokenly. "Then it's useless."

"Far from it," he laughed. "Come with me."

Less than an hour later we were at the Mahoney Detective Agency and a suave young Irishman was listen-

ing without emotion or eagerness to my story supplemented by Dibdin's interpolations. He seemed to care little for what concerned me most, but he was keen for personal details of Pendleton's appearance, height, build, clothes, lettering on his luggage and so on.

When it came to giving a detailed description of Alicia, my confusion was so pitiful that even the young detective glanced at me only once and then, like the gentleman he was, looked sedulously down upon the paper before him.

"Sixteen — in her seventeenth year!" he murmured in astonishment.

"But she is an unusual girl — well grown for her age," I caught him up.

"I see," he murmured gravely. "What's the color of her hair?"

I went on as best I could with the description.

"I could save you money," he smiled blandly, "by telling you that the girl is not with him —" and I could have wrung his hand like a brother's. "But," he added, "it won't cost much to pick him up. I'll have news for you to-morrow this time, I'm thinking."

As I sat down to lunch with Dibdin at his club, though in truth nothing was farther from my cravings than food, he suddenly burst forth into hearty laughter.

"So it's my thousand you gave Pendleton?" he chuckled. "That was sheer inspiration, Randolph — sheer, unadulterated genius! If you weren't so lugubrious just now, I could accuse you of a high ironic sense of humor that only a great man would be capable of!"

How terrible were the next twenty-four hours, in spite of Dibdin's companionship and his efforts to cheer me, no one will ever know. No funeral could possibly have darkened my household to such an extent. I dreaded to be seen by the children, who walked about like wraiths

under the sense of tragedy. I dreaded to tell them lies and yet I could not tell them the truth. Finally I felt I must say something to Laura and Randolph.

The departure of their father they received without the least surprise. Randolph inquired where he had gone, but this, I answered, I could not tell him, save that he had gone West. But the absence of Alicia left them puzzled and strained and awed. Alicia's disappearance shook them almost as it had shaken me.

"When will she be back?" demanded Randolph.

"I don't know exactly," I answered miserably, "soon, I hope."

The following morning I gave up all thought of going to the office. If my mysterious truancy should cost me my job, then it must be so. I hovered in the region of the telephone. Again and again I was about to call up Mahoney's, but I forebore. Finally, toward noon, I could wait no longer. When the connection was made, I gave my name and asked for the young man who had charge of my case.

"Was just going to call you," was the bland apologetic answer. "Your man is at the La Salle Hotel, going out on the Santa Fe to-night. He is alone and arrived alone last night. We'll see whether he starts alone to-night."

Then, of course, I cursed myself for my folly in thinking that it might be otherwise and realized that I had really thought nothing of the sort.

But where in the meanwhile was Alicia?

I had believed myself by now schooled to emergencies, but here was an emergency that left me dazed and helpless. I had fondly thought myself a match for life, but life was crushing me with pain like a blind force.

I leaped up suddenly and wandered about the house and the garden like a dog searching miserably for a de-

parted loved one. There was the stream — but I turned from it shivering. No — that was impossible! The sense of life in Alicia, her vitality, was too potent, too radiant to suffer extinction. I looked up at my little nest from the edge of the muddy stream, that frail eyrie upon the rock that I had felt so nestling, secure; barred by the trunks of intervening trees, it now seemed a prison. A faint breeze that was stirring the leaves made them murmurous with secret things which my heart cried out to interpret. Was it a litany, a dirge, or a whisper of hope? I could not read the riddle, but my bruised spirit was passionately clinging to hope.

Dibdin pretended not to observe my vagaries; when I returned I found him absorbed in Epictetus.

"This is rather good," he growled, pointing to a passage and puffing his pipe as he spoke:

"Have you not received facilities by which you may support any event? Have you not received a manly soul? Have you not received patience?"

"Yes," I muttered dejectedly, "all very well, but Epictetus never lost Alicia."

Dibdin laughed shortly. "Now," he said, "we must start out to find her. Though my feeling is she'll come back of her own accord very soon. The girl was frightened — no more."

I ignored the last part of his speech but leaped at the first.

"How would you start?" I queried sharply.

"What is the high-sounding name of that institution where she was brought up?"

"Oh, don't tell them, for Heaven's sake," I cried out in alarm. "If she is not there and they learn I have lost her, they'll never consent to my adopting her; they'll consider me irresponsible."

"Don't let's be fools," retorted Dibdin. "Those peo-

ple are not. Do you know how many boys, girls, men and women turn up 'willfully missing' every year?" No, I didn't know.

"But, by George!" he suddenly clapped his forehead in a burst of inspiration — "Sergeant Cullum! Ever hear of Sergeant Cullum?" I shook my head. "He is a policeman I know who has a genius for finding missing persons. It's positively a sixth sense with him. He's a prodigy — has traveled everywhere — a human bloodhound — he is the man to go to!"

"But — the police!" I stammered.

"Yes, I know — but we'll see whether we can make him take this as a private case — out of hours — I'll find him!"

The surge of hope to my eyes must have told Dibdin better than any words I could have uttered what I felt at that instant.

"But first we'll call that institution," he directed. "You put in a call for the number and I'll tell you what to say."

"You needn't," I decided after a moment's reflection. "I know. I shall simply inquire about the regulations governing adoptions. I can so word it that if Alicia is there they will tell me."

"Ah, now your brain is functioning again," he concluded. "That being so, I shall leave you and look up Cullum at the bureau of missing persons."

Then I recalled that I had met with the phrase in newspapers. The fact that missing persons were so numerous that a bureau of the metropolitan police was required to handle them cheered me more than any other single fact. It was consoling to feel that even in my peculiar misery I had joined a great multitude who suffered the loss of loved ones, even as in toil and labor and poverty I had merged into the vast majority.

When Dibdin left me I learned that I might adopt Alicia without any great obstacles, if she were willing, but I was no wiser as to her whereabouts. The Home, in the person of the Matron, inquired how "she was getting along." She was obviously not there, and I experienced a misery of guilt as though I had robbed the world of its dearest possession and then lost it.

Alone and bereft I sat, sinking to a mere pin's point in my abasement. I had begun to believe myself schooled in life, something of a man among men. But my own ineffectiveness was now dismally revealed to me. I had proved myself incapable of guarding even what was dearest to me in the world. I was at the bottom of an abyss from which I now felt hopeless to scramble upward. The sheer and beetling walls of granite were overpoweringly steep and forbidding. For the first time in long years, I believe I mentally prayed. I waited for Dibdin.

And then suddenly, as is the way with me when I am at the bottom, my spirits bounded upward. Alicia would come back to me, I felt in a sudden surge of assurance. At that moment I felt sure that she was thinking of me, that she was yearning to return. And before I knew it, I was blocking in magnificent plans for her education, for making a splendid woman of her, even though she already seemed perfect, of supplementing nature's handiwork with all the force that was in me. I saw her resplendent, a shining creature, the woman of my dreams! What a florid designer is hope!

But why should she have been taken from me so abruptly? The vast mystery of life encompassed me again like a shell, impenetrable — a carapace through which nature must supply the openings — and she had evidently not supplied them. Would Dibdin never come with his policeman?

Books, for so long my mainstay and support, were now useless to me. I turned over many volumes idly but my mind no longer reacted to that old and magical alchemy. The volume of Epictetus that Dibdin had fingered might have been a seed catalogue, so remote it seemed and so null. I was now a ghost among my books: I was plunged in "The Woods of Westermain," and my memory flung me the lines:

> Enter these enchanted woods,
> You who dare.
> Nothing harms beneath the leaves
> More than waves a swimmer cleaves.
> Toss your heart up with the lark,
> Foot at peace with mouse and worm,
> Fair you fare.
> Only at a dread of dark
> Quaver, and they quit their form;
> Thousand eyeballs under hoods
> Have you by the hair.
> Enter these enchanted woods,
> You who dare.

It was clear. I must toss my heart up with the lark to fare fairly, even though my pain was great.

Late that afternoon; Dibdin returned, bringing Sergeant Cullum.

That excellent policeman gave me more hope than any one, excepting my own heart, had yet succeeded in doing. He insisted upon being made privy to all the circumstances, to which he listened, his broad shaven face turned ceilingward, with the rapt air of a mystic, expecting momentarily that lightning flash of inspiration that would reveal all. Then he asked to be allowed to wander by himself throughout the house, over which he went pointing and sniffing like some well-trained hound. In the end he declared himself satisfied.

"Now give me a little time," he said.

"But what means — how do you go to work?" I asked, nettled that he should see possibilities regarding Alicia that I had overlooked.

"I swear, Mr. Byrd, I don't know," he answered reverently. "I wait for guidance."

"Guidance?" I faltered.

"Yes — from on high."

"You depend on that — only?"

"Only! — Well, yes and no. I pray, Mr. Byrd — I pray."

"You have no other means?" I queried, with a sinking heart.

"What other means are there," he demanded with glowing eyes, "that the Lord can't supply? What detective in the world can equal the Lord — tell me that, Mr. Byrd."

I saw that I was in the presence of a fanatic and I stood abashed.

"The best man in the Department," Dibdin put in encouragingly. "Sergeant Cullum *is* the bureau of missing persons."

"Give me a little time," he urged again, with the fervid intensity of prayer — Time! And it was Alicia who was missing!

I shook his hand and gave him time and parted from him with a hope that I should not have to wait for his ecstatic visions to restore her.

"He'll find her!" Dibdin exclaimed reassuringly. "Never fear. If there is one thing I've learned, it's to accept the methods of people so long as they produce the results. Let them use the divining rod if they want to, or incantations with henbane and hellebore, or trances and visions, or prayer. This almost human race of ours is made up of some very odd fish," he added with a laugh,

and he looked at me quizzically as though I were the oddest fish of them all.

"But an ecstatic policeman" — I murmured —

"Yes — queer — I know," said Dibdin, "but I don't care. And now, old boy, I've got to run back to the museum and take a squint at the work. Cheer up."

I was alone in my study after a pretense of eating supper with the children, when Jimmie burst in and flung himself upon me.

"I want to know where is Alicia," he demanded with quivering lips, and he burst into a pitiful freshet of bitter weeping. His childish tears fell like scalding lead upon my hands and I hugged the quivering small figure to me in an anguished embrace.

"Don't you want Laura to put you to bed?" I murmured with my lips against his ear.

"Don't want Laura," he sobbed chokingly; "want Alicia to give me my bath and put me to bed. Where is she? Why don't she come?"

It was a cry that tore at my heart as it echoed there and reverberated. I hugged him closer.

"I'll give you your bath, Jimmikins," I endeavored to soothe him, "and we'll float ships."

"'Licia — tells me — stories!" he sobbed out, as one broken with tragedy, and I declare I came very near to joining him in his grief.

"I'll — tell you a story — Jimmie," I gulped foolishly, "and until Alicia comes back you must be the fine little man you are — and let me."

"When is she coming back?"

"I am not sure, Jimmie — possibly to-morrow." It was my throbbing hope. For that we could go on any longer without her was simply inconceivable to me.

Gradually his paroxysm subsided. He grew quiescent

in my arms and heaved a deep sigh as we nestled against each other in silence. It is fortunate that the grief of children is like a summer shower. For so intense is it while it lasts that any serious continuation of agony would rack their small frames to pieces.

"All right, Uncle Ranny," he murmured finally. "Will you come in and give me my bath? I'll go and run it — I know how, first the hot and then the cold. And I'll put the ships in and undress. Then you come in and tell me a long story while I sail them." And he ran out of the room in a little whirlwind of energy.

I sat bowed in silence for a few minutes and then heavily made my way to the bathroom.

"Is the temp'ture a'right?" queried Jimmie, with an intense air of responsibility, his erect nude little figure standing with a ship under each arm, like a symbol of man adventuring his petty argosies on this storm-beaten planet. I put my hand judicially into the water. How important is the temperature of a child's bath! It must be neither too hot nor too cold, or disastrous results might follow.

I began to tell him an ancient story of an island that proved to be a sleeping whale, but he was impatient of that.

"'Licia," he informed me in deprecating protest, "tells me stories of Mowgli in the jungle — out of the 'Jungle Book.'" I endeavored with a heavy heart to match Alicia, and gradually I became absorbed in my task and in Jimmie, so that the darkness of life fell away from me. The water splashed and the ships tacked about in wild maneuvers, while Jimmie kept reminding me that "he was listening, Uncle Ranny."

The great mystics are those who submerge their intellect and senses into night so that their souls emerge before them like the full moon out of the blackness. Every

parent, I suppose, must be in part a mystic: for by centering his heart on little children he discerns the pulsating irresistible life of the universe, the past and the future, alpha and omega.

At least Jimmie was courteous enough to assure me, when he hugged me for the last time, with sleepy eyes, that my tale was won'erful. "But, oh, Uncle Ranny," he whispered, "say that Alicia will be back to-morrow."

I kissed him but made no promise. In the dining room Laura and Randolph were sitting over their books, — Laura grave with an anxious pucker in her white forehead and Randolph with dilated, somewhat fevered eyes. He was obviously thinking rather than reading. But I dared not enter into any more discussion of Alicia's absence that evening.

Only now after many days can I write down the events of the day following my last entry with anything approximating composure; and even now my fingers are tremulous as they hold the pencil.

I had risen early, for my sleep had been broken and fitful — as, indeed, how could it have been otherwise?

I was parched and burning within to act, to do something, to range the city, the country — Good God, I thought, can a person like Alicia disappear in that way like a pebble in the sea? But my frenzy of thought, that seemed as if it would burst the poor narrow limits of my skull, produced no definite idea. I lashed against the bars of the brain like a beast in its cage.

I entertained no thought of going to the office that morning, but half an hour after I was up, that was the only thought that flooded my mind. There are blessings in a routine of daily labor that those engaged therein can hardly understand. The treadmill, I imagine, leaves the mule but little time for speculation or grief or any other

emotions. I was that kind — or, rather that mule let loose — that could find oblivion nowhere better than in the treadmill. For routine can dull despair.

It was still half an hour before breakfast when my nephew Randolph came clattering down the stairs, meticulously dressed, though somewhat wild-eyed. He gave me the impression of having — he also — slept badly. "Uncle Ranny," he approached me, "are you going to the office this morning?"

"Yes, I think I am. Why, Randolph?"

"I'd like to go in to town with you — and go round — look around."

"What do you mean, my boy?"

"Somebody ought to be looking for Alicia all the time — don't you think so, Uncle Ranny? I'd like to try," and he looked away shamefaced.

A boy in his sixteenth year can be a considerable pillar in a household. I had somehow overlooked Randolph in that rôle. Perhaps I had been inclined to treat Laura's children too much as nestlings all, wholly dependent upon me? I experienced a thrill of pleasurable surprise in the boy's words and manner. He had said no word concerning his father, had asked no disconcerting questions. He merely desired to help.

"But of course there is somebody looking for Alicia," I informed him.

"Yes, I know, Uncle Ranny — a policeman! What does a policeman know about girls like Alicia? I — we talked a lot, she and I," he stammered. "I have a hunch I could sort of tell what she'd *think* of doing if she left home. Let me have a try at it, Uncle Ranny, please. It'll only be a few nickels in carfare."

"Certainly, my boy," I put my arm about his shoulders. To frustrate young intentions simply because they are young has never appealed to me as wisdom. "Come

into town with me by all means. I am certain Alicia will come back" — he could not know the effort this easy answer was costing me — "but there is no reason why you shouldn't try to find her." I had thrown off any mask of secrecy with all excepting Jimmie. Insincerity is a difficult habit to wear.

"Thanks, Uncle Ranny," he answered with suppressed jubilation, and for the first time in our common history I suddenly felt that I had a companion in Randolph — that he was growing up.

When he left me at the station, charged with avuncular instructions that he was to telephone me at various times of the day and that he was to lunch with me if he could, I had a tender impulse to embrace this lad, Laura's first-born, before all the concourse. But I knew he would be shamed to death by such a demonstration. So I tapped him on the shoulder and we parted grinning to keep each other in heart. I experienced a fleeting intuition that Alicia would be restored to us, but I expected nothing at all from Randolph's romantic quest for her.

My heart went out to the boy as I saw him merge and lose himself in the crowd; I felt very tenderly not only toward those of my flesh, but to all young things facing the hurly-burly of this oddly jumbled sphere.

I was becoming an ogler in my old age. Every young girl I saw in the streets, in cars, at crossings, I scrutinized searchingly, with painful leapings of the heart, when any of them in the slightest particular resembled Alicia. And the melancholy truth came to me that you can build a life to any design you please, but only a miracle will keep it intact.

Visconti was in the office when I arrived and he was kindness itself when he saw my face.

"*Caro mio!*" he grasped my hand. "Something serious?"

"Some domestic trouble — a little painful," I stammered, and he saw that I did not wish to speak of it. And the vast loneliness of human beings traversing their orbits on earth struck me as I sat heavily down to my work. What did I know of Visconti — or Visconti of me? For ages I had worked near him and I knew he trusted and had what is called regard for me. Yet the planets in trackless space knew more of each other. I believe he knows that I am a middle-aged bachelor and I know he has a daughter who is the apple of his eye — and he pays the wage by which I live. But what else did we know? He had lost a deeply loved wife and remained a widower. My heart warmed to him in a sudden sympathy. As though reciprocating, he came bustling to my desk a minute later and bending toward me whispered:

"Do not forget that your time is your own — if your *demarches* — private business — do not forget!" I thanked him but he waved his pudgy hand in sign of friendly deprecation of formalities.

. . . com 'e duro calle
Lo scendere e il salir per l'altrui scale,

lamented Dante. Yes, hard is the path, the going up and down other people's stairs, when you depend for your livelihood upon them. But Visconti in his manner endeavored to make his "stairs" those of a friend.

There was no word from Randolph that morning and my heart grew every moment heavier.

I seemed to require no food. I straggled aimlessly during the noon hour through mean streets, from Bleecker Street to Abingdon Square, in a world of listless women and dirty children, a desert, ghostly world, drab and wretched.

Shuttling back and forth, all but inanimate, I passed

Minot Blackden's studio, but with sudden horror recoiled from entering. I was driven about like a leaf. I was a shadow in a world of shadows.

Towards four o'clock I rose heavily from my desk, determined to drag myself to police headquarters in search of Sergeant Cullum. I expected nothing from him, but, still, he might utter a word of hope.

At that moment my telephone rang. It was Randolph!

His voice was charged and crackling with excitement and importance.

"Will you meet me at Brentano's, corner Twenty-sixth Street and the Avenue right away?"

"Why," I said piteously — "tell me, in God's name — have you news? — what d'you mean?"

A swirl of hope and apprehension swept me like a wave and left me gasping.

"Yes, Uncle Ranny," was the chuckling reply. "I have news — she's — I know where she is — Come right over!"

And without giving me a chance to say more, the young devil hung up the receiver. I cursed the boy in my heart for being a boy — for his callousness to another's suffering.

Exactly how I reached that corner, I cannot now remember. I did not walk and yet I cannot for the life of me recall what manner of conveyance I used. So much happened in my mind during that transit that external matters left absolutely no impression upon it. The first impression I do recall is the shock of blank chagrin that struck me like a shot in the vitals when I saw Randolph standing jauntily alone at the corner, staring at the passing crowd. Alicia was not with him.

Yet how important the young rascal suddenly seemed in my eyes. He alone in all the world had present knowledge of her. I could have fallen upon him and

hugged him then and there — and shamed him to death.

"Where — where is she?" I blurted out. "I thought you — tell me, in heaven's name!" and I seized hold of him fiercely, as though he were a pickpocket caught in the act. He glanced at me with humorous cockiness and laughed. Then suddenly conscious that people were staring at us, and that a policeman was speculatively watching our encounter, he hastily put his arm through mine and drew me away.

"Come on, Uncle Ranny, I'll lead you to where she is."

"You amazing boy!" I muttered. "But are you really sure?"

"Sure I'm sure!" he crowed. "I think it's nothing to be a detective. I believe I'd make a good one," he bragged.

"Brag, you young devil," I thought indulgently, but I made no audible reply and merely made him walk faster.

He was leading me into Twenty-ninth Street beyond Brentano's and to my amazement I found myself at the well-remembered door of Andrews' bookshop.

"Here!" I cried in stupefaction. He nodded, grinning as though he expected an oration of praise for his acumen then and there. He did not get it. I rushed in wildly, like a mad man, into those silent precincts where so often I had passed blissfully silent hours. Who would desire a garish light in this pleasant temple? For a moment I seemed to be in utter darkness.

"Kind of dark," murmured Randolph, "but I spotted her."

On a sudden my dilated eyes encountered two human beings simultaneously in their line of vision. Andrews was standing in dignity in the middle of his shop like a monarch about to receive royalty, and behind him, at a

desk in the rear, a girl was bending over some writing, an electric light illumining her fair head.

The girl — yes! — It was Alicia!

I felt the effect of a sharp blow over the heart and, brushing the astonished Andrews aside, I made a crazy leap toward her.

"Why, Mr. Randolph Byrd!" began Andrews. "Haven't seen you — "

"Alicia!" I cried out in what sounded even in my own ears like a sob.

"Oh, Uncle Ranny!" She jumped from her chair with a little scream, and, before I knew it, I was pressing her to my heart with a quivering convulsive joy that choked all utterance.

She gasped in pain, the poor child. But when my arms relaxed, she lay sobbing happily against my heart.

Randolph was so scandalized that he sullenly turned his back upon us. Andrews was watching us with discreet and sober interest.

"My dearest child!" I whispered, still in a sort of trance of ecstasy, and Alicia, with the tears trickling down her face, murmured softly.

"Oh, how glad I am I'm found! And there's Randolph," she added with a happy laugh.

Her last words suddenly woke me out of my trance. I loosed my arms and stood for an instant baffled, uncertain, shamefaced.

"What are you doing here?" I then brusquely demanded with stupid severity to conceal the turbulent emotions within me.

"I — oh, didn't you get my letter?" she faltered. "I tried to explain — I had nowhere to go — " her lips were quivering — "he told me what a burden I was — I seemed to be only making a lot of trouble — and I had nowhere to go," she wept.

"He? Who? Andrews?" I demanded harshly.

"No, no! — Mr. Pendleton," she was sobbing again.

"Ah, of course, Pendleton." I felt myself turning livid with hate for the man whose purpose in life seemed to be to wreck my own.

"And did Andrews know you were my — my ward?"

"Oh, no, Uncle Ranny," and her voice was like a child's tired of crying. "I meant to tell him later — after I told you. He just took me without — anything."

Glancing now toward Andrews, I found him discreetly standing, still in the middle of his shop, but somehow he had managed to draw my scandalized nephew into conversation to afford me the courtesy of a greater privacy. My heart went out to him in affection as never before.

"Andrews!" I called, pulling myself together to a semblance of dignity. Andrews gave a nod to Randolph and without any unseemly haste approached me, pleasantly smiling.

"This is my ward — Miss Alicia Palmer," I managed to say with forced calmness.

Andrews bowed ceremoniously as though he were meeting the owner of the Huth library or Bernard Quaritch. Yet there was a curious twinkle in his shrewd old Scotch eyes.

"Like all young women of the present day," I went on, with astonishing glibness — that is at its best when a man is lying for a woman — "she wanted to prove her independence by scorning my poor protection, Andrews — to earn her own living — you understand, Andrews?"

"Indeed — indeed?" said Andrews. "And she *can* earn it, too. Now I understand the mystery. She recognized a second edition of 'Paradise Lost' at a glance. Your training, Mr. Byrd — your salary is advanced, Miss Palmer."

Alicia smiled, blushing faintly, and in that smile I

suddenly realized how much of the child still clung to this well-grown young woman — how much of the child, no doubt, remains clinging to every woman. She was pained, distraught, suffering, yet she seemed to feel that she had done something very courageous and dignified. And it was to her dignity I hung on with tenacity, for instinctively I recognized that this was a turning point in her life — that the woman was now putting away the child in the cradle of the past.

"I think I shall ask you to release her, Andrews." I laid a hand upon his shoulder. "Some day I shall explain to you more fully. It's been — but never mind that. I should like to take my ward home — with your permission?"

"Certainly, certainly," he affirmed with spontaneous vehemence. "But come in soon, both of you — she's of our stripe, Mr. Byrd — she loves the good things! — come in both. I expect to have some new things from Professor Gurney's library that'll delight you."

"We shall indeed, my dear Andrews. Get your hat, Alicia." And as she turned away for her things, I managed to murmur this much to the kindly Andrews:

"I shall never forget your conduct in this matter, Andrews — you're a great bookseller, but, man dear, you're even a greater gentleman!"

And with as little delay as possible we left the shop.

A spate of questions boiled in my brain and foamed up like turbulent waters backed by a dam. But all at once I came to a sharp decision.

I knew enough. It was that devil Pendleton that had filled her mind with the thought that she was a burden until the poor child was wild with a frenzy of distraction. But he had not been able to trust to his persuasions. Then there was the scene of that dreadful evening when, in her bewilderment, she realized herself as an

apple of discord, a shatterer of families. I believed I understood enough.

"Where did you sleep, Alicia?" I asked her nonchalantly.

"I have a little room in Twenty-fourth Street," she answered simply. "I haven't paid for it yet. The landlady wanted money in advance, but I told her I didn't have it, so she let me stay, anyway."

"Let us go there, my dear, and settle it now."

"Yes, Uncle Ranny," she murmured low.

"I've got to hand it to you, 'Licia," broke out Randolph, emerging from his silence. "You're a true sport — for a girl!" Whereat we all burst into happy laughter.

And for the rest of our peregrinations as well as in the train, the lad could not take his eyes from Alicia in sheer amazed admiration. It was as though he were seeing her for the first time.

CHAPTER XX

Had I time to speculate philosophically, I could expend much of it in wondering why pure joy cannot be recorded. Perhaps because we experience so little of it.

Of sorrow and tribulation we strange creatures that are men can give a pretty fair account. From Job down we have excelled in it. But before sheer joy we are dumb. I can only repeat to myself the poor colorless words that I am happy, happy, happy as the day is short.

For one brief space of reaction after finding Alicia, the senses reeled, the worn body and mind swooned into a sort of deliquescence of lassitude, the eyes smarted with unshed meaningless moisture, the overdriven heart throbbed with a vast supernal relief, coextensive with the universe. Then, swiftly, with an almost audible sound, that unnerved brain slid into its customary shape of health, more wholesomely joyous than ever before, and all the world was bathed in freshness.

The blue of the sky was fairer, the sunlight purer, and even the poor suburban grass of Crestlands autumnally waning, glistened with the verdure and brightness of a new creation. But who can describe happiness?

Pendleton is gone, Alicia — the children are here.

No eight words in the language of Shakespeare and Milton have ever breathed to me the same meaning as those eight words. Yet what do they signify on paper?

All Europe is in a turmoil, and the Germans have all but taken Paris, yet this, I perceive, is my first mention of a vast catastrophe. What tiny self-absorbed creatures

are men! People are dying and suffering by the thousands, yet we cisatlantians scan the headlines and pursue our own ends in the accustomed way. What though half the planet is in peril — I have reconquered my home!

Why, I wonder, had I ever imagined myself to have a horror of home? A home is a little island of personal love in the vast impersonal chaos of existence — and pity him or her who never lands upon that island.

Of nights, occasionally, I now indulge myself in a fire on the hearth. The wood that burns brightest, I note, leaves only a little heap of white ashes. When my eyes rest upon Alicia, or I see the children flitting about, or hear their ringing voices through the house, I experience a wonderful contentment that I am the fire at which they may warm their hands. I, who once entertained fantastic visions of future greatness, of name and fame, now feel content to become a little heap of white ashes.

Sergeant Cullum, excellent man, journeyed out here two days after I had found Alicia, a day after the legal ceremony of adoption, to apprise me that "he believed my ward to be in Baltimore." I was about to burst into uncontrollable laughter, but my conscience smote me and I was ashamed. In my vast relief I had wholly and selfishly forgotten this good man who was still upon the quest. What power of divination or answer to prayer had directed his thoughts to Baltimore, I cannot imagine. But with my contrite apology and thanks went a gift that I trust has soothed his ruffled feelings. We parted in friendship. Oh, excellent thaumaturgic policeman!

Randolph burst into a loud sniffing laugh when I told him and Alicia of Sergeant Cullum's visit and the Baltimore "clew."

"Oh, cops are idiots!" he chuckled arrogantly and looked toward Alicia with a haughty proprietorial air.

"They don't know *anything!* Didn't take *me* long to dope out where to look for 'Licia," he boasted. "I figured it out like this: 'Licia is bugs on your old books. She was looking for a job to earn her own living, wasn't she?" Alicia bent her head, still shamefaced over the episode. "What'd I do? I'm strong on engines. Wouldn't I go to a place where they make or sell engines? Well, with her it was books. I went around to some book places — 'n' then suddenly I had a hunch: Andrews — that you and she always jaw about. I looked him up in the 'phone book. An' sure enough, when I went round and peeped in through the door, I saw Alicia upon a ladder handling some of those old books there. I thought I'd go in and call her down, but then I thought 't would surprise her more if you and I came in on her together — and I beat it hot-foot to a 'phone. Cops! — They'd say, Baltimore — South America — anything, so it sounds good!"

And again his glance wholly appropriated Alicia. The youngster seems to think he invented her. But I am full of gratitude to that boy.

The closure of the Stock Exchange and the abrupt slowing up of financial business has filtered like a shadow even into Visconti's and is giving me some unhurried hours in which to ponder the future.

How many middle-aged bachelors, I wonder, have conjured similar visions, constructed the same castles of thin air? To educate Alicia, to serve and to love her until my love surrounds her so that she cannot choose but return it — to create a woman Pygmalion-like out of this very sweet Galatea — what could be more blissful? Alicia is now in her teens. But suppose she were sweet-and-twenty, could she ever think with anything but filial affection of a man nearly twice her age who stands to her *in loco parentis?*

Like a lovesick boy who pulls at the faint intimations of his mustache and searches the newspaper for cases of marriage at seventeen, I eagerly scan the prints and cudgel my memory for such unions as ours would be. But the papers are filled with war and rumors of war. It comes to me suddenly that a certain aged Senator has not so long ago married his ward, under even a greater disparity of ages — and I am absurdly happy. I see myself with Alicia matured and radiant, ever young — living a life of bright serenity, calling endearing names.

> "Did I hear it half in a doze
> Long since, I know not where?
> Did I dream it an hour ago,
> When asleep in this arm-chair?"

But this is folly. Tennyson is out of fashion and there are greater fools than old fools. I ask too much of the high gods. Enough has already been given to a crusty bookworm like me. Suppose I had married Gertrude! The children's voices would never have made music for my ears. Nevertheless, Alicia shall have the best education I can give her.

Visconti must be aging, I fear, for he has taken to repeating himself. He has told me often before that his daughter Gina is the apple of his eye, but during these somewhat listless days in the office in which "extras" figure largely and strategy is the one indoor game, he has been going into more detail.

I dined at his house last night and to-day he asked me again to dine on Saturday. I dislike refusing him and I like lying less. But I declined on the plea of an engagement.

"I always forget," he returned with a laugh, "that

a young man is not *un' burbero* of a widower like me — that a young man, in short, has engagements."

I made some sort of deprecating noise. He talks as though I were twenty-two, and I like him for it.

"But you see, *amico mio,*" he went on explaining, "it is like this: Gina, the *carissima bambina mia,* is the apple of my eye. And she must be — what do you call it — amused — amused, made gay, bright — you see?"

I signified my clairvoyance.

"She is nineteen — *a fanciulla* of nineteen, she must have much — eh — amusement, not so?"

He is fond of the Socratic method and I humored him.

"But doesn't she go to parties — has she no girl friends?"

"Ah, *sicurissimo, sicurissimo.* But a girl — nineteen years — it is young men in the house that amuse her, eh?" And he slapped me on the back and roared with laughter of a boisterous heartiness that somewhat, as novelists say, "took me aback."

I have not exactly been seeing myself in the guise of a youth cut out to amuse Gina Visconti.

"How of Sunday?" he asked, with a sudden quizzical soberness. "Sunday you can come?"

I regretted his insistence, but somewhat laboredly I explained that I am weakly addicted to books; and that Sunday was the single day when I could sit among my books and —"

"Ah, but of course!" gravely. He understood full well that I was a student, a scholar, who outside office hours pursued a higher life, and so forth.

I felt mawkish and mean but I clung to my Sunday.

"Monday, then — shall we call it Monday?" he pressed.

I could not be so churlish as to decline further. But

I hardly knew why a sense of uneasiness stole into my bosom after his subsequent words.

"The *fanciulla,*" he went on, thoughtfully vehement. "She is all I possess — all in the world. At my death she shall possess everything I have. She has it now! For whom then do I work if not for Gina? As for me, I could go back to Italy — maybe. I have enough. But Gina — she is American girl — ah!" and he kissed his finger tips with unction. "She is fine American girl!"

Having said that, he veered into talk about Belgium, Von Kluck and general strategy.

But why should he so persistently sing the praises and prospects of his daughter to me, a clerk in his office?

I had a sudden impulse to go to him and unbosom myself on the score of my own *bambimi* and my own aspirations for them — but somehow I could not. That is an island girdled, not only by ordinary reticence, which is with me a vice, but by a host of emotions like those flames that circled the sleeping goddess. I am not a Latin; I cannot bubble forth my inmost hopes or flaunt my heart upon my sleeve.

Sunday evening — after a wonderful walk with Alicia through the already waning woods of Westchester. There has been a certain air of gravity overhanging her, of contrition perhaps, that stabbed with pain. I realized then to what degree her blithe spirit and the starry laughter of her eyes had been the wine of my recent life. I could not tolerate her seeming depression. Besides, there was the matter of her education to be discussed. Jimmie clamored to go with us, but this time even his privileged position did not avail him. I desired to be alone with Alicia.

Was it my mood, I wonder, or do the woods in reality begin to whisper a farewell in the decline of the year? Every tree, even to the youngest sapling, seemed to nod

to us as we walked and to rustle a murmur like the leave-taking of a pilgrim bent on a lengthy journey. I have ever been impatient of reading descriptions of nature and have chimed with the scoffers at the pathetic fallacy. Nevertheless, I can bemuse myself for hours listening to the wind among the tree tops or gazing at the haze upon the hills; and in a slow measured rhythm, as if having endless time before them, they invariably spell a message, — a message infinitely sad, but for the creative laughing sun that rides triumphant, high over all.

"Come, Alicia!" I broke out brusquely, joining the sun in his laughter, "we have some bright things to talk over. Don't let us allow the woods to lull us. They are going to sleep; we are not. Here you are, ready for college. Isn't that soul-stirring?"

She emerged from her reverie as a person shaken from a drowse and smiled with a distant look in her eyes.

"Bright things," she murmured pensively; "everything that has happened to me since I came to you has been bright, and everything soul-stirring. That's what makes it so hard, Uncle Ranny — I have been so useless. What good am I?"

I laughed uproariously enough to make the woods shake. Did Alicia know how much I enjoyed combating such statements or did she really mean it?

"You have been — " I wanted to tell her banteringly that she had been a burden and a drag upon my household, a weight not to be borne — but I perceived that she was more than serious. She was sad.

"Now you are, of course, talking nonsense," I answered flatly. "But there is college before you; that ought to cure all that. Perhaps you're a little morbid. Bright associations will change that."

"But how," she protested, "can you talk of sending

me to college — with all the expense? And I so worthless?"

"We won't discuss that, my child," I broke in. The expense had indeed occupied my mind — but I had formed a plan for that. "Tell me what you would like best to study — to be?"

"That's the trouble, Uncle Ranny," she replied pathetically. "What can I be? — Perhaps I might work for Mr. Andrews?"

"Modern girls," I informed her, "judging by our fiction, invariably develop literary, dramatic or histrionic talent. She must act, write fiction, or preferably plays. Journalism and settlement work are no longer fashionable. If the worst comes to the worst, they turn militant suffragists, but even that is on the wane; but the two careers are not incompatible. Don't you feel the urge in your young bones? Which of the arts is it that is calling you? The pen? The stage? Speak, Alicia — for this is the critical hour!"

She detected raillery in my voice and laughed softly.

"I know you are making fun of me, Uncle Ranny," she said, "but it's not of me alone. All the same, I wish I did have some talent, but, oh, I know I haven't! Sometimes — I wish — I think — oh, Uncle Ranny, I am ashamed to tell you what I —" and without finishing her sentence she covered her face with her hands and I noted that her neck was suffused with a deep blush.

"But you must tell me, my dear," I gently took her hands from her face. "Haven't I just become your parent and guardian by ironclad legal adoption? And a terribly stern parent and guardian I am — make no mistake about that!"

"Well," she gazed downward shamefacedly, still exquisitely blushing, "I suppose I must, then. Sometimes I think, Uncle Ranny," she went on with deliberate firm-

ness, " that there is one thing girls always think of, but never talk about — that is more important than any of the others. Oh, I suppose I am terribly improper and immodest, but if I am, it's because — I don't know any better — so you'll have to forgive me. But, oh, I suppose — he'll come some day and — to — to make a home and — and to bring up children seems — more wonderful than anything else! You've made me say it, Uncle Ranny!" she turned away with tears of vexation — " I suppose I am horrid — but you've made me tell you and I told you. Can't a girl study to be — for that — as for anything else?" And still tormented by her brazen immodesty, she plucked yellowing leaves agitatedly and scattered them to the winnowing breeze.

As she was turned from me, she could not have seen my arms going out suddenly as if to take her, and then falling again to my sides. I longed to embrace her and to crown her with all the glory of womanhood. But my conscience warned me away. In my heart, however, happiness leaped up like the lark I have never seen and warbled joyously a divine melody that I had never heard. It required courage for Alicia, a young girl, to confess what she had confessed. And courage joined to all the other qualities I knew her possessed of must produce the best that is in womanhood.

It is a commentary on our times that Alicia, a girl ready for college, was ashamed of what she had told me!

I was a fool to press her further, I suppose, but then and there I determined to be at least as brave as was Alicia.

" Have you," I asked, hoping my voice was not shaking, " have you already some one in mind?" She shook her head vehemently, still plucking at the leaves. I could not repress a profound sigh. " What does he look like in your mind's eye, Alicia? What is your vision of him?"

I knew I was courting pain, but there are moments when even torture is irresistible.

"I hope he will be strong — and fine — and manly," she murmured as if to herself — "and have at least some of your — goodness, Uncle Ranny." Every attribute of that hypothetical "he" was a reproach to my infirmities — a blow at my peculiar weaknesses. But I had invited it. The ideal of a girl never errs. It is her emotions that may lead her astray. Oh, yes — she credited me with some "goodness." Few are the women, however, who choose a man for his goodness. In my quality of "Uncle Ranny" I was "good." I stood for a moment in silence, writhing with anguish, alternately conjuring up and banishing the hatefully magnificent creature of Alicia's dreams. But at last I gripped my soul with sudden resolution. Now at least she was mine; and I must accustom myself to the idea of her being some one else's at the earliest moment — to the inevitable renunciation. She had innocently and adorably honored me with her greatest confidence: For the present, at least, I must make the most of my little happiness.

"Come, dear," I gently touched her on the shoulder. "You have told me what I wanted to know." I put her hand through my arm and we strolled on slowly. "We are horrible old fogies, Alicia, and we mustn't tell a soul about our views — or we should be ostracized and possibly jailed. But nothing you could have said would have made me happier than what you have just told me. I know of no greater career than the one you have chosen. And college, much or little as you like of it, can serve you for a finer womanhood no less than it can for anything else. In fact, more, I think." From still swimming eyes she gave me a sidelong glance mingled so much of gratitude, shame and pride, that I laughed aloud.

"There is one thing you've got to make up your mind

to, Alicia." I drew her close to my side. "You must come and tell me everything that's on your mind without repression. Don't forget, my dear, that I am your father, mother and most intimate friends. Think how sorry we should both have been if you had suppressed and hidden what you have told me."

"Yes, Uncle Ranny," she breathed and very sweetly in a way to melt the heart of a man, she lifted my hand to her lips and kissed it. I was irreparably "Uncle Ranny!"

I dared not make a movement in return. At that moment I might have betrayed more than ever again I could hide. But the woods were now of another hue; the invisible lark was still singing, albeit a sadder strain.

We decided that Alicia is to enter Barnard next week and commute with me on the daily train.

CHAPTER XXI

DEAR God! How I cry out for peace, and there is no peace!

Who would have looked for disaster at the plump hands of Gina Visconti? Yet, as though she had willfully shut the door of my livelihood in my face, that innocent girl has abruptly cut me off.

I cannot go back to Visconti's. That accursed dinner, which instinct made me shun, was the cause and occasion of it all.

I had begun foolishly to feel myself at home in the Visconti household. When the housemaid informed me that the *signorina* would be down directly, I strolled into the drawing-room leisurely, not in the least surprised that I was apparently the only guest, and gazed again at the shining new furniture, costly and glistening, for the *n*th time wondering how it continued to stay so new. There is a scattering of saccharine pictures on the walls that invariably make me smile: Cherry Ripe, the Old Oaken Bucket, Sweet Sixteen; a glittering small marble of Cupid and Psyche and a crayon enlargement of the very stout lady that was Gina's mother. Why, I wondered, do not modern Italians stick to their own old masters? I once bought a very fair copy of Pope Julian II in Florence for fifty lire. Even Gina's energetic modernism, however, seemed unable to exorcise the peculiar airless odor of an Italian's drawing-room, due largely, I suppose, to hermetically sealed windows and constantly lowered shades.

Gina came down directly, as had been promised, in a very pretty satin evening frock that struck me as too light for a girl as full-bodied as she. That is a detail, however, which was superseded in my mind by the query as to why she should feel it necessary to romp into a room rather than walk. But I know she aspires to be hyper-American. Her greeting is always warm and her energy was the one touch of ozone in that stuffy drawing-room. A moment later entered her father, his dark-red face pardonably gleaming like a moon through the haze at the charms of his only daughter. For Gina is not only pretty — she is eminently modish, to the last wave of her rich black hair.

"Is she a fine American girl — or is she not, eh?" Visconti's half-proud, half-defiant look seems to challenge all present.

The dinner was more than usually exuberant with a wealth of champagne for so small a company and hothouse grapes; indeed the exuberance itself seemed of the hothouse variety. We jested, we laughed at nothing, we were gay as old friends at a reunion. At the Visconti's I am always foolishly like that Byron-worshiping lady who could not long abstain from referring to Missolonghi. Somehow I find myself caressingly touching the subjects of Dante or Petrarch or even Leopardi, and invariably Gina caroms against me with a thrilling cabaret, a new dance or the latest "show" — and I am nowhere.

After the coffee Visconti, whose mind seemed preoccupied, rose abruptly and with one of his gleaming smiles left us on the hackneyed plea of letters to be written.

Gina was restless for a minute or two after her father's departure. She walked over to the piano, struck a chord standing, then suddenly sheered to the phonograph and asked would I dance if she turned on a lovely

fox trot. Apologetically I was compelled to inform her that the fox trot was as foreign to my accomplishments as an act on the trapeze.

"I know you could learn to be a lovely dancer," said Gina. She then sat down beside me on the expensive tapestry davenport, with one foot under her and one ankle to the wide world and leaned forward on her elbows so that the slender shoulder straps of her frock pressed upward four little mounds of pink flesh toward her ears. She has very pretty ears, has Gina. A very engaging child, I thought. Holding this soulful attitude, Gina queried softly,

"Don't you love the movies?"

"Yes," I said.

"What have you seen lately?" she pursued.

"I have only seen one — it was a series of pictures of the South Sea Islands."

"You mean you've never seen any others?"

"No — I'm afraid not."

"Oh," she gasped, "I've loved the movies since I was that high" — and she pointed to a somewhat excessively oily portrait of herself painted at about the age of ten or eleven.

"I believe in having a lively time," she ran on. "When I was in public school some of them called me the 'little guinea girl.' I cried terribly — but I made up my mind I wasn't going to be a 'guinea girl.' I was going to be an American. Wasn't I as good as any of them?" she demanded passionately. "What was the matter with me? Then I found out what was the matter with me — American girls are always having good times. So I thought I'd have as good a time as anybody.

"I cried until my father let me go to the movies nearly every afternoon and twice on Saturday. And I

always treated some other girl — an American girl — to a ticket to go with me. They were friendly then, you can bet. They stopped calling me a guinea girl."

Gina could not possibly know how pathetic that sounded to me. The curious savagery of children toward those alien of race, I reflected, is one of the last survivals of the tribal state of mankind. The somewhat overpowering scent she used struck me as a survival also, though I could not remember of what.

"There is my cousin, Jennie — her name is really Gemma" — the girl warmed to her story — "she tried to be American, too, but she gave it up. When I went to finishing school in Darien, she was already married. Four years she's been married and has three children. Now what's the use of that? She can't have a good time now! Babies — babies — babies! — she hardly ever goes out. And her husband's quite well off, too. He's a contractor. But he's an Italian — and thinks that's the right way for a girl to live. Uh-h!" and she shuddered slightly. "I'm going to marry an American!"

A fierce light of resolution leaped to her liquid dark eyes and I own I felt terrified.

"But — but aren't you young to think of marriage?" I murmured lamely.

"Young!" repeated Gina in surprise. "I've been thinking about the kind of man I'm going to marry since I was thirteen years old!"

Obviously that was one subject she had given mature reflection.

"Haven't you?" she demanded.

"No," I laughed, "not as young as that."

"Do you like Italian girls?" she leaned toward me abruptly, wistfully.

"Yes, indeed!" I answered her, laughing. "There is

Dante's Beatrice — and Petrarch's Laura — and even Raphael's Fornarina must have been — "

"Oh, I don't mean those," she cried, flushing excitedly. "I mean Italian-American girls — I love American men! The man I'm going to marry is — something like you."

I like simplicity, and disingenuousness in the young — or in the old, for that matter — but her attitude was now so — so unconventional, with her large ankle rocking to and fro and her bosom, as she leaned forward, almost touching my shirt front — that I feared her father might be displeased were he to enter the room suddenly. The scent, moreover, was clouding my wits. With my hand to my forehead I rose ponderously.

"Let me see — " I mused with heavy facetiousness, as though cogitating a deep problem, "do I like them?" I walked a step or two and faced her. "You are the only one I know — and I certainly like you," I added mildly.

She uncoiled herself, rose up swiftly and took a step in my direction. On a sudden she stumbled, gave a little cry and pitched forward, so that I barely had time to catch her.

"Did you turn your ankle?"

"No — yes," she gasped and lay for a moment in my arms breathing heavily, her bosom pressing against mine.

"Let me lead you — " I began.

"It's all right," she whispered thickly. "Just let me rest a minute." And then that astonishing girl suddenly lifted up her hand, passed it lightly over my head and murmured that she loved the color of my hair!

"It's light brown," she explained, "not pitch black like mine," and then she rested her head lightly on my shoulder. "And I love your name — it's so nice — *Randolph!*"

"Let me lead you," I murmured, as though I were the helpless one.

"*Ecco!*" I suddenly heard the voice of Visconti laughing behind me, and Gina's hand clutched my shoulder convulsively. I confess that at my heart was a clutch of sheer blue funk.

"She has just turned her ankle!" I exclaimed mechanically.

"It's all right, papa," put in Gina's cheerful voice. "It's these old slippers. I'll go and change them." And to my amazement she straightened up, flashed a radiant smile at both of us, and walked to the door with only the slightest of limps.

"Sure you can walk alone?" I managed to stammer.

"Oh, yes!" Gina waved her hand at the door. "I'll be down soon."

The father laughed loudly and put his hand upon my shoulder.

"Come, *caro mio,* let us have a little smoke." I followed him dazedly. "Wonderful girl, Gina!" he exclaimed. "High spirits, eh?"

"Er — yes, indeed — very high." I felt as though I had emerged from a severe physical struggle.

"I can see — oh, even an old man like me can see," he chuckled jovially, as he held his cigar box toward me in the smoking room, "that you young people like each other — eh? Oh, sit down, sit down, *amico mio.* It is all right — all right. I must get used to the idea of the *bambina* being grown up," and forcing me down into a leather chair, he continued to tap my shoulder by way of emphasizing his words. "I have been young — yes! I understand — and trust me, my boy, you cannot do better. Gina — Gina is one treasure for a man. Ah — yes! No love like the Italian woman's love. She will make you the best —"

"But wait — for God's sake, Mr. Visconti, wait," I cried in agony, leaping from my chair. "I can't — I mustn't even pretend to think of such a thing. Gina is far too — "

"Say no more!" he interrupted vehemently, tapping me with the back of his hand on the chest. "You are a fine, gooda young man!"

"Thanks!" I gasped, "but you don't understand. I am in no position to marry any woman at this time. I'm — "

"Hold on!" he flung me back into the chair with an exuberant force that would have made me laugh if my vitals had not been chilled by terror. "Is it that I do not know? Do I not know how your capital did go — pouf! like that? But all that I have — Gina has it. She will have enough," and he nodded his head with pregnant emphasis, "enough, my friend. And Gina's husband — he will be my son!" He struck his large chest a mighty blow and threw back his head with triumphant finality.

I attempted no more to rise. It was useless.

"Signor Visconti," I began huskily, "you do not understand me. I cannot marry anybody, ever. I have four children to bring up — educate — to be responsible for. The youngest of them is eight. I — you honor me greatly by your kindness — but marriage is not for me."

He stared in speechless stupefaction at me as though I had revealed some incredible horror to his eyes.

"Four children!" he whispered, with dilated eyes. "But who — but I thought you have never been married?"

"I have not," I replied with an intense relief that was like a restorative. Then, catching his meaning glance, I went on hastily; "They are my sister's orphans. I am responsible for them. They have no one else."

"Ah!" he drew in his breath with the sound of a syphon. "That is it, is it?"

"Yes," I murmured, rising, resolved to put an end to this ghastly episode. "Now, if you will excuse me — "

All at once his hands shot out and clutched both of mine.

"You're not good man!" he shouted vehemently. "No — not only good — you're a great man! *Caro mio* — ah, I never make mistake — no!" And before I knew what he was doing, he had embraced me in Continental fashion and large tears stood in his eyes.

The cup of my torment was complete. A mad desire to get away possessed me — only to get away. I stirred to move but he held me resolutely.

"We will think it out, my friend," he announced with sober energy. "We will talk it over — work it out. I, too, am a man with a heart, *caro mio*. It is I who understand — Have I not lost my poor Giovanna — Gina's mother? If you two love each other — well — we must find — a way."

Hope bounded in my pulses as I noted that his enthusiasm was now tempered by thoughtfulness.

"No, Mr. Visconti," I murmured with painful firmness. "I have no right to love Miss Gina — and I wouldn't dream of telling her so, even if I did — I am not free — "

"You — you're not *promesso* — what d'you call it — engaged?"

"Oh, no, no! It is only my heart that is engaged — not my word — there is some one else — but it can never be anything — "

"But what does it mean?" he flashed, dark anger purpling his features and kindling the air like a torch. "What did I see! My girl in your arms — what was

that!" His eyes now darted fiery anger and his arms were arrested in the midst of a violent gesture.

I shook my head slowly. His anger was infinitely more agreeable to me — like manna — after his parching enthusiasm.

"There was nothing," I answered quietly. "Miss Gina really turned her ankle on the rug. And I caught her as she fell — just as you would have done."

He stood panting for a moment, his gaze riveted upon me. At last he turned away, with a pitiful movement of regret, apology, resignation. The excellent man gave me the benefit of the doubt.

"Ah, *Dio mio,*" he muttered. "*Poverina!* Go, my friend, now. I must think. *Bellezza mia! — cara mia!* — what will I say to her? Ah, *Dio!* what a bitter world!"

"I am more distressed than I can say," I murmured, with the crushed voice of poignant suffering, "but what can I do — or say — more?"

"*Niente* — nothing, nothing," he muttered. "Good night!" and my admiration for his spirit was high when he held out his trembling hand.

I tiptoed to the door like a thief and as I took my coat and hat, Gina called out from the top of the stairs in uncomprehending astonishment.

"Not going — Randolph!" And like a small avalanche she shot down the stairs.

"Yes — yes — he is going, *bellezza mia!*" firmly shouted Visconti as he came running towards us. "He is called away — good night — good night!"

"Good night," I said and held out my hand to Gina. But Gina's manners are more modern than her father's. She was dumbfounded and she turned her back upon me angrily, registering doubtless some standard emotion from a favorite movie. It was useless to try to placate

her. I slipped out of the door which will never more open for me.

The nightmarish quality of the episode persisted in my consciousness like a drug throughout the passage homeward, and it was not until I entered my door and saw a light in my study that reality began to assert itself.

Reality meant the end — the end of my livelihood, the end of my hopes and plans — the end of the tether. Like an unfledged boy I must begin to breast the future all over again. A hero of romance would doubtless at that moment have thrilled to the struggle with new and seemingly insuperable obstacles. But alas! I am not a hero of romance! As I threw my coat upon the hat-stand, a great weariness and a deep dejection fell upon me.

Alicia came out of my study to greet me. As usual she had been waiting up for me.

"Why on earth aren't you in bed?" I growled irritably. Alicia scanned my face amid the shadows cast by the lamplight. "Go to bed, child," I repeated; "go to bed."

"Something has happened," she murmured, frightened; "something has happened. Oh, tell me — what was it, Uncle Ranny?"

I looked down at her with a scowl that was meant to be forbidding — a warning that I was in no mood for triflingness.

She seized my hand, still holding my gaze with that starry look in her eyes that invariably probes deep and rests in my inmost soul.

"Something has hurt you, Uncle Ranny," she whispered tremulously, "and you must tell me." Our eyes dwelt together for a space. "Oh, tell me!" she gulped,

with a sudden terror dilating her eyes. "It isn't — it isn't that — man come back!"

"Oh, no!" I shuddered involuntarily at the image she evoked of Pendleton. "Not that. Thank Heaven, Alicia, you're no Pollyanna; you see the worst at once.

"No," I finally muttered, looking away, "I have hurt somebody."

"I can't believe that," she retorted vehemently. "But if you think so — Please, please, tell me. It will be so much better, for you, Uncle Ranny."

I had a sudden impulse to take her in my arms, but the emotion was not paternal. And — I was to her "Uncle Ranny." All unconscious she was guarded by her circle of sacred flames. Spasmodically I tore my hand out of her grasp and walked unsteadily across the room to my table.

"Sit down over there," I motioned her as far away from me as possible. She stood still without complying.

"What was it, Uncle Ranny, dear?" she breathed.

A sort of bittersweet pain went through me at the epithet and I reviled myself inwardly for the impurity of my dark mind in the presence of this simple, lovely purity. A profound sigh escaped me as I leaned my elbows on the table and made a feeble effort to smile at the mocking visage of Fate.

"I cannot go back to Visconti's any more, Alicia," I told her. "Something has happened. That is ended. I must look about for something else."

"Oh!" she gasped, "is it as bad as that?"

"As bad as that," I repeated mechanically.

"Then I know it was nothing you could help," she answered with a sudden radiance that was like a benediction.

"So there is no use worrying about that. But you

mean the money," and her face clouded anxiously. "But I know what I'll do, Uncle Ranny," she came gliding toward me. "There is always Mr. Andrews for me, you know. You remember what he said: He'll take me back any time."

An instant of blackness was succeeded by a sudden burst of illumination. Andrews! Andrews and the library — the library, all catalogued — complete! Andrews would either buy it or help me to dispose of it, and Alicia and the children need not after all suffer by my catastrophe. My books were more like my flesh and blood, and to part with them — but that consideration was of singularly brief endurance at the moment. Those books, like a troop of old friends; would rescue us all from disaster — come like a phalanx between us and defeat.

"You amazing child!" I cried, leaping to my feet. "Light! — You've brought me light! Andrews! — The very man! To-morrow I am going to Andrews!"

I seized her by the shoulders and whirled her about the room like a marionette in a savage burst of energy. Alicia gasped and, spinning away, laughed wildly with a laughter that bordered upon sobs. I dread to reflect what our neighbors would have concluded, had they observed through the windows the strange Dionysian rite of the quiet middle-aged bachelor and his youthful pretty ward.

"Now go to bed, child," I commanded brusquely. "I have some thinking to do."

"Shall I make you some coffee?" she pleaded, coming toward me, still laughing.

"No — go to bed!" Before I was aware she had left a darting birdlike kiss upon my cheek and fled like a breeze from the room.

My eyes dwelt upon the door for a space where she

had vanished, and then they turned involuntarily to the serried peaceful rows of books that had been my life, — that now, in the last extremity of need, must, like the camel in the desert, yield up their blood to be my livelihood.

The following morning, that is to-day, I made my way to Andrews, armed with my catalogue, and greatly to that good fellow's astonishment offered him the sale of my library.

He stared at me in blank amazement for an instant and then, recovering himself, declared that he would like to see it.

"Come back to lunch with me," I suggested.

He could not do that, but agreed to come to dinner in the evening.

His shrewd old eyes took in much more than the details of my copies and editions during his two or three hours at my house. With discreet but observant gaze he followed the children about and measured, more accurately no doubt than I could have done, the worth and solidity of my household. He had seen something of my easy bachelor life in the old days and, doubtless, was now drawing his contrasts and conclusions.

"What do you think you can offer?" I queried with some anxiety, as he stood carefully fingering the books which, like Milton's one talent, it were death to hide — for they were bread.

Andrews sat down and stared for an interval thoughtfully before him.

"I'll tell you what I'd like to offer you before we talk about the books —" he spoke with an even, a studied deliberation. "I'd like to offer you — a partnership!"

It was my turn to stare in stupefaction.

"It would be a great thing for me if you came in with me, Mr. Byrd," he now spoke more quickly. "You see, I'm an old man, getting on, sir — getting on. I want some new blood in the place — new blood — a fresh point of view and young enthusiasm. That young lady of yours coming in the way she did woke me up to that. And whom could I leave it to when it comes to the end?" he speculated wistfully. "I have no relations."

I opened my mouth to speak, but Andrews took the privilege of age to disregard me.

"I want a man with the tender touch for books, Mr. Byrd — the tender touch. It's a beautiful business," he smacked his lips — "beautiful! The hunting for them — it's — it's a knightly quest. And to find homes for them — it's like placing bonny children. The bookmen of America are generous. We ought to go to England — buy libraries — increase our treasure."

"But, my dear Andrews," I spluttered, in agitated protest. "Do you know what you are offering me? A career, a livelihood, life itself — the future of those children of mine — what can I contribute, except these books — and compared to your business and good will! — "

"If you were rich," he interrupted, "do you suppose I'd have the effrontery to make you the offer? You see, I've known you a long time, Mr. Byrd — and it's been a great pleasure to me. If I had a son — but," and his voice struck a harsher note with things repressed — "it's no use going into that. That is the business for a man like you.

"We all need money," he pursued with new energy. "It's a thing to despise if you can — a thing for sentimentalists to drivel about. But so long as our present social and economic system continues, only a fool would decry money. It's no good to you when your heart is breaking, but neither is food nor water, nor shelter nor

leisure. But when you want food and shelter and leisure, that is as long as you're above ground, you want money. I have prospered — done well. Will you come with me, Randolph Byrd?"

"My dear good Andrews," I paced the room agitated, exultant, terrified by this stroke of good fortune. "But how can I take advantage of your unheard-of generosity? What can I offer? Will you take my books as a contribution to capital?"

"No," he shook his head, with twinkling eyes and a queer crinkling of the crow's-feet about them. "I don't think we need them. Books are always — books," he concluded oracularly, with a ring in his voice of the true bibliophile's reverence.

"Say you will come."

My heart was suddenly flooded by a rich inundation of hope. This was permanence that Andrews was holding out — this was an anchorage. It was neither Salmon and Byrd, nor Visconti's. This was my own peculiar realm, and only a snob or a fool could reject it. *Ça me connait.* All the turmoil and troubles of the past seemed to be melting rapidly away like the shapes in dreams or unsubstantial clouds. My life would be secure, the children nourished and educated. Alicia should have her chance unchallenged — should be prepared against the advent of that dream-hero of hers — when he comes — when he comes! What else was I now living for? I felt as might have felt the old woman of the nursery rhyme, who lived in a shoe, had any one suddenly offered her a vine-clad well-stocked cottage of many chambers, with a future reasonably safe for her progeny. I saw on a sudden the clamorous city that had more than once droned forth my doom, now rich in prospects and gayly reciting the flattering tale of hope in my ears — the hope of becoming a bookseller in face

of my dreams of scholarship, eminence — fame, possibly! But this was no dream. With a flitting smile I recognized the wayward cynicism and irony of it. And in deep gratitude I gripped the hand of Andrews to seal the bargain.

BOOK THREE

CHAPTER XXII

In returning to this all but neglected record of the things that made up my life I realize with incredulity the passage of time. I realize, too, that when you live the most fully, you write, reflect and record the least. It was *after* his years of slavery that Cervantes wrote Don Quixote and inside a prison house that Bunyan and Sir Walter Raleigh composed their best-known works.

I shall never compose "works", I am certain now, for my lot is business to the end. Three times during the past two years I have been in England and in France, attending sales, buying books, manuscripts and libraries, and very narrowly I escaped sailing on the *Lusitania,* which would probably have been the end of these memoirs and of me. Would it have mattered? To the children, possibly. Not to me, certainly — except in so far as they would have suffered by my exit. For though the business of books is to me the one nearest akin to pleasure, it is nevertheless a chaffering and a haggling in the market-place — the reverse of all my tastes and aptitudes.

It is odd that externally I bear few of the marks of the indolent lotus-eating soul that possesses me. People viewing me superficially might think, with Andrews, that I am fitted for stratagems, spoils and — business.

Yet how happy I was when Andrews made me his offer! How I plunged into his affairs — our affairs — and gave them all my energy! The children, I exulted inwardly, the children are now safe!

But nature abhors anomalies. To work for children alone is not enough. One desires to work for a bosom companion, for some beloved woman, whose breast is home, whose warm arms are the one refuge against the world, whose eyes are the bright gateways to heaven. That fulfillment I never had and never shall have. Hence the anomalous sense of frustration, of incompleteness. Some psychoanalyst would doubtless brand this as a well-known middle-aged complex, call it by name like a familiar and proceed to "cure" me of it. But I am not going to any psychoanalyst. I know my trouble and also its name — though I cannot call it after King Œdipus or King David or the like.

Galeotto fu il libro e chi lo scrisse mourned the flame-like Francesca da Rimini. And the name and the author of my trouble is not Galeotto but — Alicia — Alicia whom I did not take and now can never have.

I am no romantic Paolo to Alicia's Francesca. I am a business man — yes, a middle-aged, almost alert New York business man of the approved hard-varnish variety — with good, pat stereotyped phrases and a show of manly sincerity. Who does not know that straight talk of most of us modern business men, under which we can hide so much cunning, shrewdness and chicane? Could I not have simply taken possession of Alicia by a sort of eminent domain? Oh, I don't mean anything improper! I mean by all the astute and usual methods, the bell — book — candle and orange-blossoms sort of thing, like the hardheaded Mr. Pettigrew of American novels, or the wicked marquess or baronet of the English.

But I could not — I could not.

Under the carapace of the turtle or the armadillo is a body of flesh with nerves and blood and viscera — a soft living part. So also under the shell of the maligned business man.

An infinite pity and tenderness stir me at the thought of Alicia. I suddenly feel in my inmost soul the softness of her cheek and it touches me as the delicacy of one's own child's flesh must touch one. If I had a child of my own — but on that I must not let my mind dwell even in dreams.

Yet, why not? Dreams are all I am going to have and, pardie, it is more than I deserve. Much, very much has been given to me and I ought to feel profoundly grateful. And I do feel grateful.

But — Alicia — is engaged.

I can hardly write the words, though these are the words that have driven me to writing again.

I have been happy these two years and more — happy in my fashion. In midst of the tumult and throb of the war spirit I, in common with other business men, have been buying and selling and chaffering and huckstering, rearing Laura's children, educating Alicia and prospering. If newly rich labor has been buying motor cars, it must be admitted that some abruptly enriched business men and their wives have had time to turn from furs and bric-a-brac and interior decorating so far afield as my own remote specialty. They have been buying books — libraries by the yard, classics and first editions by the hundred. The fact that that admirable American bookman, the young Widener, had managed to gather a magnificent collection during his all too brief life, has stimulated many to emulation. Shelley need no longer weep for Adonais. I have sold collections of Keats *en bloc* to gentlemen who have probably never read Endymion in their lives, and even now I am holding a set of Shelley first editions only because I could not bring myself to part with them to the very crude, almost illiterate, customer who proves to be the highest bidder. Rather would I sell them for less to a more enlightened bookman.

Oh, yes, I have been happy in my fashion. Yet, glancing over the few brief scattering entries in this record, why does the tinge of melancholy persist?

I find a quotation from Anatole France under date of some twenty-six months ago to the point that "even the most desired changes have their sadness, for all that we leave behind is a part of ourselves. One must die to one sort of life in order to enter another."

What is it that I regret or regretted — unless it is the mere passage of time that makes me older and older? And again I find:

"Life is a game best played by children and by those who retain the hearts of children. To those who have the misfortune to grow up it is often a nightmare." There it is again — the persistent note of regret. Time will take them all from me — all, including Alicia. And then? — How did I ever come to let passion steal into my heart?

I find some phrases from Hazlitt to the effect that "we take a dislike to our favorite books after a time," and that "If mankind had wished for what is right they might have had it long ago," and then later, a sort of credo, or confession or apologia *pro vita mea:*

"This is a commercial age. If business is the path of least resistance to a livelihood, so that a slenderly endowed creature like myself may cling to the surface of the planet and pass on what has been accomplished to the generations that must accomplish more — if that is the easiest way, then that is the way of nature, my way. All business may be more or less ignoble. But, if so, who in the present state of evolution can wholly escape the ignoble?"

Yet I have not altered in essentials. Who shall say how I thrill at the sight of beauty, or the rare work of a master? I cannot declare how my pulses throb when

a new author swims into my ken — his new voice, his fresh note catch at my throat like a haunting melody and I have known my eyes to fill at the sheer joy of the discovery.

Oh, you, Randolph Byrd, aged seventy, when you come with your white hair and purblind eyes to scan these notes, will you receive them at their face value? Will you believe that the sense of frustration underlying them has to do with careers and fame and lives of Brunetto Latini? No, my septuagenarian self — I have a respect for you and a warm pity. I cannot so coldly gull you — take advantage of you! Damn careers and business and Brunetto Latinis! I want love, passionate love and children of my own loins and the beloved on my heart, and just the common run of happiness that a thousand thousand men are at this moment enjoying. Then why have I not taken it? Why have I not taken Alicia as King David took Bathsheba, or whatever the lady's name was, in virtue of sheer desire and power? Because I have been a finicking, hyper-refined, hyper-sensitive fool, my aged friend; and now that she is engaged to be married I should be — but now it's too late! Always, always, Randolph Byrd, you have been too late!

All the world can give me advice and analyze me, yet nobody really knows me. Dibdin, who knows me best of all, in reality knows me least. He summed me up, or thought he did, before his periodical departure for parts unknown, some twenty months ago.

"You see," he said, "you've really got a genius for kids. I told you how I felt about Laura. Yet what do I do? I go off to the devil knows where, because I am a tramp. That is stronger in me than anything else. But you, you see, gave up everything else for them — everything. Who but a fool could blink the meaning of that?"

Who but a fool, my dear old Dibdin, could be so blind as you? Who but a fool could fail to see that I am consumed with passion for Alicia and had only been waiting, dreading, hoping until she might be old enough to know her own mind and heart — and waiting too long?

And now Alicia is engaged — and to my own nephew, Randolph — and life for me, life in the rich, vivid, colorful, romantic sense of the word, is at an end.

My nephew Randolph — a sophomore at Columbia — engaged to Alicia!

Flashes of savagery strike into my heart when I could find it possible to hate that youth — notably when I catch the Pendleton expression in his face, the Pendleton shiftiness in his eyes. At such moments I experience an intense, all but irresistible desire to grapple with him as on a certain occasion I grappled with his father, to knock his head against the wall and choke that brazen-faced, insolent temerity out of him with his last breath.

But I am only Uncle Ranny — and I don't suppose I shall do anything of the kind. Have I not brought him up? Have I not labored and toiled for him, watched over him? Is he not my child like the rest? There is something about the person, the very flesh of the child one has reared that disarms one's anger and turns the heart to water. His bad manners hurt more deeply, yet they are not like the bad manners of a stranger. His transgressions are not like others' transgressions. In God's name, your soul cries out, there must be redeeming features, extenuating conditions! Have I not had a hand in shaping him? And was he not ineffably endearing as a child? He may be somewhat wild now, but is not all youth like that on its path to manhood?

This is a parent's point of view, I see, not a rival's. Why, why did that boy, of all the males in the world, take Alicia from me?

It was only yesterday that it happened, but already it seems like an ancient calamity that stamps its victim with the slow grind of years of pain, blanches his flesh and presses him down into the limbo of those undergoing the slow drawn-out tortures of life.

Yet I was happy yesterday. I came home at one, as I do of Saturdays, and the early April sunshine, while still treacherous, was nevertheless full of dazzling promise of spring, of relief from the dread winter we have endured. My head had been buzzing with schemes like a hive. The lease of the châlet expires in May and I was full of vain notions of taking a larger, more attractive house that should be a suitable setting for Alicia. Only one year more of college is left for Alicia after this and then — and then — Alicia had talked of entering the shop, and I should have her with me all the time. How I longed and looked forward to that day! Alicia my constant companion, sharing every moment of the day, going and coming together, lunching together, discussing everything. Who shall blame me if I saw visions?

And then, perhaps an hour after lunch, they suddenly entered my study together — Randolph a half-pace or so behind her with something hangdog in his look — an expression I detest in him — and Alicia, head high, flushed with a look of desperate resolution about the somewhat haggard eyes that startled me.

I had been occupied in turning over the pages and collating a Caxton, a genuine Caxton that I meant later to show to Alicia — "The Royal Book," (1480, 2d year of the Regne of King Rychard the thyrd) — a beautiful incunabulum.

Randolph moved abruptly forward with a jerk of the head, and, his eyes failing to meet mine, he blurted out huskily:

"We're engaged, Uncle Ran — 'Licia and I!"

"What!" I yelled harshly as one in pain and fell against the back of my chair. "What — what on earth do you mean!"

But he merely looked away, making no response.

"Is this true, Alicia?" I shouted, as if to overtop the tumult in my breast.

"Yes, Uncle Ranny," breathed Alicia, her eyes gazing into mine with a look so poignantly sad and charged with pain that it froze me as I was about to speak. I sat for a space, my mouth open, our eyes dwelling together for an instant. And then, as by a sudden effort, Alicia smiled valiantly, laid her hand stoutly on the shrinking boy's arm, and then abruptly she lowered her gaze.

"But — but why — why now?" I spluttered. "You are both so young — you only a sophomore, Randolph — and you, Alicia — in God's name, why now?"

Alicia glanced at Randolph as though depending on him to speak and then contemptuously giving it up as hopeless, she straightened her shoulders bravely and murmured in low distinct tones:

"I promised Randolph. He wants me to be engaged to him and I promised him I would."

"You — you mean you — you love each other?" I stammered miserably, for every word was a knife thrust into my own heart.

The lad Randolph was now shamed into a little manliness.

"Yes, we do, Uncle Ranny," came forth in his throaty voice. "That's just it — we — we love each other. And — 'Licia has promised to be engaged to me 'til I am through college and get a job."

"I suppose it had to come, Uncle Ranny," explained Alicia with what seemed to me a very labored serenity. "We grew up together. We have been such chums and — and Randolph seemed to — to need me. Don't you

see, Uncle Ranny?" There was a piteous note of appeal in her voice which only seemed to lacerate me the more. But I could not speak.

The sunshine had gone out of the April afternoon. Waves of darkness seemed to be beating over me, and the strength and energy of a few minutes back had oozed out of me like so much water. So weak and shattered did I feel that on a sudden I was seized by a panic fear of collapse.

"Please leave me now," my lips, strange cold dead things that seemed in no way a part of my body, brought forth mechanically, yet with heavy effort. "It's — it's a shock — we'll discuss it later." I do not envy those two the sight of my face at that moment. I am pretty certain Randolph did not see it, for he turned away, but I am in doubt about Alicia. Her eyes were brimming with tears and she came toward me with a sudden curious movement of the hands, as though she felt rather than saw her way. Then abruptly her hands dropped to her side and she paused and turned back sharply.

They left me then, both of them. I remained alone — crushed, stunned, alone.

And suffering agony though I am, there is now in me a strange new sense of familiarity with suffering. Anguish and heartache, thank God, are no longer novelties. That much anodyne the sheer business of living does bring to one. I am as sensitive to them as ever I was in my prehistoric days of ease and leisure and reclusion, but they are old acquaintances now. I must go on, hiding my dolor as best I can, working for the sunny comely lad, Jimmie, so brilliant with promise, for the grave sweet-faced Laura, replica of her mother, and — yes — for Randolph and Alicia. I cannot rant and I must not betray any grief or make a spectacle of myself before them. I must carry on.

"Small as might be your lamp," observes the sage of Belgium, "never part with the oil that feeds it, but only give the flame that crowns it."

A poor and tenuous oil is that of my peculiar lamp, a petty flame and a murky result. But such as they are, I must guard them.

I cannot down the feeling, however, that there is some mystery, some secret reason behind this lightning-like development between Alicia and the boy. With a leaden heart I must record it that he has proven a disappointment to me. His mediocrity as a student concerns me less than his general tendency to shiftiness, his unsteady eye and his heavy drooping nether lip when he tells me that he "spent the night with the fellows at the frat house", that "a fellow's got to associate with friends of his own age", that "he's got to make friends", and so on. He is through his allowance four days after receiving it and repeatedly begs for more. More than once I have caught the odor of alcohol about him as he came in late at night, and only the fact that he is Laura's boy and that I have reared him has made me condone his many offenses.

Have I been spoiling him, I wonder? Would I have condoned and tolerated as much if he were my own son? He is over a year younger than Alicia and though a handsome enough lad in his way, I fancy I see too much of Pendleton in his face for comfort. His father also was markedly good-looking when he married poor Laura. Have I, I wonder, been rearing another Pendleton?

But Alicia, the bright, the fair, the radiant, almost a woman now, with more wisdom than I ever before found in women — how came she to do such a thing as to engage herself to him? I can understand his possible infatuation. But a girl, I had always believed, learns her woman's arts by instinct. How can she be so blind

to the boy's character and defects? Can it be that she really loves him? Love, love, love! That blind force that is said to move the stars — why can it be so haggard, gaunt and painful a thing in the ordinary light of day? Woe is me that I am too dull to comprehend it! Like the blooded horse in *Werther* that bites his own vein to ease his overstrained heart, I must bleed inwardly — I must suffer and endure.

CHAPTER XXIII

SINCE it is for you, Randolph Byrd, aged seventy, that this vagrom journal has been written, I should deem myself derelict and insincere if I did not convey to you in every detail the sort of creature you were in middle life. If you fail to approve of your progenitor, I shall know that I have been exact, for I fail to approve of him myself.

We are at war. Every fiber in me should thrill to the President's declaration of war against Germany, but here I have been calmly turning the pages of "The Description of a Maske", by Thomas Campion (S. Dunstone's Churchyard in Fleetstreet 1607). It is a beautiful volume in excellent preservation, one of five brought in by a young man who is going to enlist. He inherited them from a grandfather, possibly an old fellow like you, who held them precious. I bought them eagerly, for I know where I can dispose of them, though I should dearly like to place them in my own shelves. We shall make a profit on them, and a handsome one. That is the sort of thought that runs through my head, Randolph Byrd, *aet.*70, and that is the sort of man you were thirty odd years ago. You never were young in your youth, my fine friend. Perhaps you will grow younger as you grow older.

But that is not all. Above the sensuous pleasure in the books and overriding the thought of lucre, is the

strange romance of Alicia and your namesake, Randolph Pendleton. It blasts all my previous conceptions of romance. Where is the color and the warmth and the glory of it? I had expected after their announcement of a few days ago that I should be bitterly engaged in watching a glorious April dawn that would blind me with its strange flames because it was not for me. Instead I seem to see only a somber murky twilight whenever I surprise those two in private colloquy. The mere thought of the possibility of Alicia loving me (fantastic arrogance!) was wont to irradiate my heart and to make me positively light-headed, so that I could scarcely withhold my lips from smiling publicly. But my young cub of a nephew seems haggard and obsessed by care, and upon Alicia's eyes I have more than once observed traces of tears.

What can be the meaning of that?

Were I in reality a parent instead of masquerading as one, I should no doubt endeavor to fathom this mystery. But you see, I am still, as always, inadequate. The truth is, I dare not yet talk to Alicia about her love. A little later, Randolph Byrd, a little later — when the pain is more decently domesticated in my bosom and will not fly out like a newly unchained hound. Meanwhile is it not best that I fasten my attention upon Thomas Campion his Maske?

I may fill a little of the interim perhaps by telling you what I had passed over in the busy silence of the last two or three years, that Fred Salmon has attempted to make *amende honorable*. Fred Salmon, who was the means of my losing all of the meager capital you should have lived upon in your old age, has reappeared with a commendable attempt at restitution.

Begoggled and be-linen-dustered, he drove up to the châlet some ten months ago in a magnificently shining

car of bizarre design and he entered my door booming like not too distant thunder.

"Hello, Ranny!" he shouted out, and in a twinkling my study seemed to be brimming with him, inundated by him, overflowing with Fred and his Salmonism. "Have a cigar, my boy — how are you? — how is the family? — how is the book business?"

"Which am I to answer first?" I grinned mildly.

"Never mind!" roared Fred. "I see you're all right. Ask me how's tricks with me?" He was so obviously bursting with news that I complied at once.

"Very well — how are your tricks, Fred?"

"Booming, booming, Randolph, my boy — and kiting! Jack Morgan himself wouldn't blush to be in what I've got into! Put that on your piano, Randolph, my boy!"

Fred is one of those who likes to talk of Jack Morgan, Harry Davison, Gene Meyer and Barney Baruch, as though they were his daily cocktail companions. This distant familiarity of moneyed men gives him a strange exuberance.

"Consider that I have tried it on my piano and like the prelude," I told him. "Now for the rest of the opus."

"O-puss! Oh, fudge!" he laughed. "Gosh! You're a great old bird, Rannie — great old bird! Well, listen here, fellah —" he ran on, wild horses could not have held him — "you think I like to brag, don't you? Don't deny it — you know you do! Well, it's God's truth, Randolph, I do. Some folks are like that — me, for instance. But I had nothing to brag about, see? So I made up my mind I'd get into something so good it could stand any amount of bragging. So what do I do, but go into oil — oil, Randolph, my lad — and now I've got it — I've got it! Rich? Say, I'm going to be filthy with it, Randolph, positively oozing, crawling with money. That's how it's with me, boy!"

"Congratulations!" I held out my hand. He gripped it hard. "And what do you do with your millions?" I added blandly.

"Oh, I ain't got 'em yet!" he shouted. "But they're coming, Randolph — they're on the way, on the way! I hear the sound of their dear little golden feet right now — sweetest sound you ever heard. And that reminds me! —" And on a sudden he opened his duster and from his bosom pocket brought forth a number of dazzling yellow certificates with gorgeous blood red seals upon them.

"See these?" his large features were beaming a noonday flood of generosity. "Remember that twenty-five thousand you put in of your own spondulix just before Salmon and Byrd went blooy? Well, this is that! Here is a thousand shares of Salmon Oil to cover that, Randolph — and some day you'll cash in with interest, my boy — big interest too — and don't you forget it!"

I stared at him in silence for a space. But so genuine and sincere seemed his air of righteous triumph that I repressed the Rabelaisian laughter that shook me inwardly and only said:

"Thank you, Fred. You're a — white man."

"Don't say a word!" shouted Fred, thumping me on the back. "It's all to the good!"

"By the way," I could not help adding after a glowing moment, "what is the stock selling at now?"

Not for nothing am I the partner of the canny Andrews.

"Oh, now," retorted Fred in a tone somewhat injured at my lack of romanticism — "now it ain't selling at all — yet! It's not issued yet, see? We haven't floated it yet. I'm giving you this out of mine. You can't sell it for a year. This is organizer's stock. But never fear, my boy, this will net you more than twenty-

five thousand some day, or my name's Hubbard Squash!"

There was nothing to do but to hail Fred as a philanthropist and humanitarian and to thank him for his golden-hued certificates,— sweet augury of fabulous riches to come. I keep a small iron safe in my study now to house such precious objects as the Campion Maske and the Caxton that I bring home overnight or longer for study and collation. Very solemnly I clicked the combination lock, opened the safe and carefully, with ritualistic, almost hieratic movements, I reverently put Fred's certificates into one of the little drawers. Fred watched me attentively. That ceremony seemed to answer his sense of the dramatic.

"Yes, sir!" he nodded with great satisfaction, as a period to my movements. "You have put away a little gold mine there, my boy. And you don't have to work it, either. I'll do that! All you'll have to do is to cash the dividend checks. And a word in your ear, Randolph: If I 'phone you and tell you to buy more, just you do it, boy — just you do it!" Without describing to him my momentary mental reservation I, as it were, promised.

"And, oh, say," bubbled Fred, struck by a sudden memory, "who do you think is in on this property with me? You'd never guess in the world, so might as well tell you! It's our old college chum, Visconti — the guinea — and a great little sport that guinea is, let your uncle Fred tell you. He's got the spondulix, boy, and he'll have more, he will. He'll strike it rich on this deal, you bet your hat, and he'll be richer than ever. And say!" one idea seemed to follow another in Fred's brain like salmon running over rapids. "Hasn't he got a peacherine of a daughter, the old boy? Know her? Great girl, Gina — wonderfully good sport! She and I — say, we're great pals, that girl and I — cabarets, dan-

cing" — and he shook and quivered in a sudden fragmentary movement of the latest dance — "great sport!" he concluded, panting ponderously.

"Angels and ministers of grace defend us!" I heard myself murmuring.

"Here! What you praying about?" demanded Fred, humorously suspicious.

"It was an invocation, Fred," I explained, "it's the most wonderful thing I ever heard. Why, you and Gina are meant for each other. She's a fine American girl" — I almost said "fina Americana girl," "and you — you're a — you were simply created for each other!"

"Say," grinned Fred exultantly, "honest, Randolph, do you think so?"

"I do, most certainly."

"Well, well — wait and see. Stop, look, listen — watchful waiting is the word," he muttered mysteriously. "Ta-ta, old man, I've got to shoot away from here. Now remember what I said: Don't buy until you hear from me, nor don't sell until you hear from me!"

"Stay to lunch," I begged. "After all, it's Sunday."

"Sorry, can't," he returned importantly. "Big things brewing. See you again. Ta-ta!" And he was gone.

Such was the recrudescence of Fred Salmon and the certificates are still in my safe in witness of it, and greatly to my surprise they have a market value now, even though I cannot sell them. Judging by the curb quotations the golden-hued leaflets are worth ten thousand dollars to-day. But I know too well that something will happen before the year is up and they will be worthless again. How should it be otherwise, since they are mine?

Fred Salmon was never meant to be a whisperer or a negotiator of secret treaties. The children in the house that Sunday morning could not fail to overhear him and

ever since he has been known to them and referred to as "Brewster's Millions."

There is no contour to life. Life is chaotic. Whenever I thought of Fred as marrying at all, I had mentally mated him with Gertrude. That, in my opinion, would have been an ideally eugenic combination. But instead, Fred is obviously attaching himself to Gina and Gertrude has been eighteen months married to Minot Blackden, the rediscoverer of glass-staining. They live happily in apartments, about a mile apart, and I am told breakfast together occasionally.

And this notation, oh, my aged correspondent, proves to me that I am not a novelist. For were I a novelist, I should doubtless idealize these pictures — romanticize as I note them. Gertrude — my old cold flame, Gertrude — married to Blackden! There ought to be a chapter of that — a veritable lyric epithalamium upon those highly modern spousals. Blackden should fix them forever in a series of stained-glass windows!

Instead of that, my feeling is, "What am I to Gertrude now, or what is Gertrude to me? No more than Hecuba to the Player in 'Hamlet.'" Always in place of romance, reality seems to break in, to take possession of my pen and, willy-nilly, I find myself recording events as they happen, without varnish or adornment.

But if my pen is so veracious as I have intimated above, why is it so overproud and under-honest as not to record the torture that persists beneath the seemingly calm surface of life, the agony, the anguish of seeing Alicia daily under unaltered conditions, the same beloved Alicia, yet with a barrier reared before her to which the screen of the Sleeping Beauty was a miserable clipped privet hedge, to which Brynhild's circle of fire was a pitiful conjuror's trick?

Having been forced by the pressure of circumstance into ordered and natural life, I am now maddened by a passion to straighten it altogether out of its odd contortions and entanglements. My soul cries out to live naturally and virtually whispers to me every day that natural living is the first requisite to constructively social living. I see heights glimmering of service, of great impersonal love — but only through personal love lies *my* path toward them.

In other words, I am now aware that you cannot, like another Aaron Latta, "violate the feelings of sex." A few primal instincts there are, so tremendously important, so powerfully imbedded in the human, in the animal organism, that to violate them is to twist and crumple the personality, the very soul within one — life itself. A normal man must wive and beget and rear before his imagination is disentangled and freed for the constructive and corporate life of humanity — before his use to society is real and stable, reliable and not a sham.

I have reared children, but I have never had a wife or ever begotten any children of my own. Alicia embodies the completion of life for me — and Alicia is now pledged to some one else, leaving my world empty and meaningless. Come what will and avoid me as she may, existence cannot go on in this manner. I must take the risk of private talk with Alicia — to my pain, possibly, but for my information inevitably. Is she in reality in love with my nephew?

"Alicia," I began gruffly this evening after dinner, "I want to talk to you. Will you come into my study in a few minutes?"

She lifted her eyes to mine searchingly for an instant and lowered them again swiftly.

"Yes, Uncle Ranny," she murmured. There are

times when I feel I could jump out of my skin, as the phrase is, when she calls me Uncle Ranny. That "uncleship" has been my undoing. Yet what a wealth of prerogatives it has brought me!

I chose this evening because somehow all the world lay tranquillized. Gusts of wind and plumps of April rain during the day gave way to a great stillness even over this suburban countryside, where the rumble of the trains is never absent; but the humid smell of the newly stirring earth was still in my nostrils and our little lawn was already green with young grass. One could almost hear the sap mounting in the trees. There was a vernal feeling of peace and hope in the house — in my very nerves.

We were in particular good humor moreover under the influence of Jimmie's table talk. That boy is a source of constant delight and bubbles vitality like a fountain. His presence in a room positively gives the effect of added light. He is just now in love with long words and announced that he "would give me a composition on how to tie a necktie." He meant a demonstration and we all laughed heartily.

"Never mind," murmured Jimmie cheerfully to himself. "Demonstration — I won't forget that one."

Griselda declares he is exactly as I was at his age. But I am certain I never was half so delightful.

Laura was not with us. She is at a boarding-school at Rye this year and comes home only upon alternate week-ends. Laura, sweet and grave-faced like her mother, is never as hilarious as the rest of us often are. My nephew Randolph was also absent. He, I suppose, was dining at his eternal "frat house."

It occurred to me how happy we could be, just the three of us, Alicia, Jimmie and I — plus, of course, Griselda. Alicia is beautiful now with a tender coloring

and movements of exuberant gayety that are like wine to the heart. When her face is animated and her eyes flashing with merriment, the house seems charged with the very elixir of delight. Of late, however, I have seen little of her gayety and more of her pensive, silent mood and that has been depressing. But to-night Alicia was her old lovely self of the days before the engagement and I seized the occasion to discover what I could about that puzzle.

Alone in my study, puffing at a cigarette which might have been a string of hemp for all the taste I discerned in it, I feasted my mental eyes for the *n*th time upon the picture of Alicia married to me, greeting me as a wife upon my home-coming at night, nestling in my arms for the delicious intimate fragmentary talk of the day lived through, of the myriad little threads that take their place in the woof of life only after the beloved has touched them with her love. The long quiet evenings of intimacy and the nights which, in Goethe's phrase, become a beautiful half of the life span.

Am I immoral, O Randolph of seventy? Then I dismally fear I am immoral. For these are the pictures, old man, and these the thoughts that produce them — bad as they certainly are for me. For Alicia is my ward — my child. And whatever happens she must not suspect them. With an effort and a corrugated brow I dismissed them as I heard Alicia's step on the doorway. Very straight and demure she was as she entered, bringing with her that aura of infinitude which always quickens my foolish pulses.

"Sit down, Alicia," I waved her to a chair with an attempt at a smile.

"Is anything the matter, Uncle Ranny?"

"No — no — nothing — " with exaggerated naturalness. "I only wanted to talk to you."

"Wasn't Jimmie cunning!" she laughed, slipping into a chair. "He says he is going to be a writer like Mark Twain and let you sell his books. This environment, he says, is enough to make a writer of any fellow." I laughed.

"Tell me, Alicia — " I began briskly enough, and then, noting her eyes upon me, those deep eyes of a woman, I faltered:

"Do you — did you — when did this love affair between you and Randolph begin?"

Alicia made no answer.

"Was it sudden — spontaneous — like that?" and I snapped my fingers, still clinging to the spirit of lightness with which we had left the table.

"I have loved all of them — always," she murmured, gazing downward, "ever since I've been with them."

"I know that — so have I — so do I — " and my laugh sounded in my own ears like the grating of rough metallic surfaces together. "But I don't go marrying you all — do I? That's a very serious business, Alicia, this marrying."

How dull and prosy the words fell upon the air about me! Does middle age mean being prosy when you mean to be alert, bright and crisp? Yet I feel younger than any of them.

Her face lifting slowly and her wide-open gray eyes searching mine suddenly struck me as so piteously sad that I then and there wrote myself down an ass and a cad and turned away to hide my shame.

"I know it's serious, Uncle Ranny!" and her voice was like the muted strings of a violin. "But don't you think I understand? Please don't be afraid of me — won't you trust me — please?" And she left her chair and made a step toward me with an imploring gesture of the hands.

"I am not a designing woman," she declared, with a half smile, and then she ran on more vehemently, "I know that Randolph is younger than I. He can tire of me a hundred times before he is ready to marry. Oh, we are a long way from marrying. But he — he begged me to — to be engaged to him and — and for certain reasons that I can't tell *any one,* I agreed. And I'll keep my word if he keeps — " and there she paused.

A solemn, quite maternal tenderness in her face as she uttered those words so fascinated me that suddenly I saw her anew — a new Alicia — and with a strange tug at the heartstrings I marveled at the miracle.

I saw her suddenly not as *a* woman, but as Woman — the mother of mankind, the nurse, the nourisher of all the generations. There was in her eyes a something rapt and sybilline — she was the eternal maternal principle in nature, the keeper of man's destiny, older than I, as old as the race — the spirit of motherhood!

And *she* was engaged to Randolph!

Then, as though emerging from a maze, I blurted out, "You are not in love with him, then?" . . .

"Of course I love him!" she returned with fire. "I love everybody in this house. This has been home — heaven to me. Why shouldn't I? — Oh, you Randolph Byrd! — why are men so blind? I've trusted you all my life as if you were God — and you can't let me manage — but you've got to trust me! — I can help — I must — I can't tell you — but you'll never regret it! — Oh, please, Uncle Ranny, don't press me any more," she added more plaintively, her force suddenly leaving her as though she had come to herself with a shock. A gush of tears filled her eyes. "Don't be — too hard on me," she faltered. Her hand groped for the chair behind her, and she sank weeping into it.

"Alicia! My God!" I cried out, choking. Flesh

and blood could not bear it. I leaped toward her with a wild impulse to take her in my arms, to comfort her, to pour out against her lips the truth that I trusted her and loved her more than any human being on earth. . . . My arms went out and all but engulfed her. But — strangely — I checked myself. A powerful inhibition suddenly held me arrested as in a vise. Both the curse and the blessing of middle age were inherent in that inhibition. If I had so much as touched her then, I knew in a flash of quivering intuition that the truth I had perforce so carefully guarded would be spilled like water. If I touched her then, I was lost!

Hastily I retreated a step or two. For a space of intense charged silence Alicia sat drying her eyes, a little crumpled Niobe, the while I with trembling fingers of the hand that was on my table fumbled stupidly in the cigarette box.

"Trust you, Alicia!" I muttered, with an immense effort to control my voice. "I trust you beyond any one. You are mistress in this house. Do whatever you think best. I didn't mean to make you cry, child, forgive me. You — you have answered my question. Now don't let's have any more tears — please!"

And lighting a cigarette automatically I now approached her and stood nearer to her.

"I'm — s-sorry, Uncle Ranny," she faltered.

She had called me Randolph Byrd in her vehemence and the sound of it was still reverberating in my brain. But I was back to Uncle Ranny, like another Cinderella in her pumpkin.

"Do you know what you are, Alicia?" I stood over her, puffing and chattering against time, "You are an old-fashioned girl, that's what you are — with emotions and — and all sorts of curious traits, when you ought to be discussing Freud and complexes and the single stand-

ard and the right of woman— " the right of woman, I had almost said, to motherhood irrespective of marriage, upon which I had heard a fashionable young woman descant only that morning in the shop, apropos of a book she was buying on the Dark Lady of the Sonnets. But I paused in time.

" And all sorts of things," I trailed off lamely.

" Yes," she murmured, a faint sad smile wavering on her lips. " I'll do that next time. I'll deliver a lecture to Jimmie some evening on the Œdipus complex — or why it's inadvisable to marry your own grandmother."

Clearly Alicia is no stranger to the patter of the time. But what a glorious, natural creature she is!

Her touch of satire after her tempest of emotion ravished me as perhaps nothing else. How adorable she was in all her moods!

" Do it now, Alicia," I cried.

" Now — I must go up and wash my face," she murmured. I couldn't bear to let her go.

" Where — where is Randolph to-night? " I clutched at her presence for another instant.

" I don't know," and with a sudden swift movement she glided out of the room. If only she knew how bewitching she is! But perhaps she is better ignorant.

One thing is certain. She has answered my question. She is not in love with Randolph.

Dimly I perceive a faint cohesiveness to the swimming lines of the picture. For some reason that she knows best, that seemed good to her, she yielded to the boy's importunities. In some way the mother in her is involved. How little, after all, I know of my eldest nephew! Alicia doubtless knows more — much more.

But this is the query that rises before me like a black pillar in the roadway:

Can that splendid girl be deliberately planning to sac-

rifice herself for some real or fancied good to the boy — hoping the while that by the time his dangers are past, he might tire of her, and release her plighted word? But suppose he shouldn't tire — as indeed how could he? Can I risk her happiness in that manner — her happiness which means to me a thousand times more than my own?

My own happiness — useless to think of that now! Whatever Alicia did or didn't betray, it was patently obvious that I am simply Uncle Ranny — as ever was. For one instant of excitement I was Randolph Byrd — but only for that. Ah, well, no use to dwell upon that bitterness now.

But about that young pair — what would I better do, my aged counselor? Doubtless at seventy you will be able to give me the sagest of advice. But that will be too late, friend, *par trop,* too late. I must watch more closely from this moment on. I have much to learn, Randolph Byrd. Of this, however, I am certain: One individual may with nobility sacrifice his life for another. That, according to my lights, is inherent in the very order of the universe. But every one is entitled to his or her own happiness. Woe and shame to the crippled soul that allows another to maim him in his happiness. Every human being has the unequivocal right to his share!

I am rambling, I see. My brain doubtless is still awhirl with the emotions and overtones of the interview with Alicia.

The headlines of the evening paper over which my tired eyes stray are vocal with the war spirit, with news of bridges guarded, of preparations, of munitions, of espionage, of ships, troops, volunteering! But the import of these makes hardly an impression upon my mind. So impersonal a thing is patriotism juxtaposed to the intimate business of living!

It is late. I must go to bed. Alicia's fiancé has not yet come in.

To-day arrived a letter which overshadows all else, which momentarily put even my last night's talk with Alicia in the background and aroused strange sleeping instincts of alarm, of combat, of savage alertness. The last thing I could now have expected or thought of was this letter from Pendleton. The brilliant April sun turned darker as I opened it and the warmth went out of the vernal air, turning spring back into winter. This is what I read:

DEAR RANDOLPH:

I am writing you from St. Vincent's Hospital in San Francisco. A business trip that brought me here laid me flat with typhoid, and all my money, what remained for the return trip to Kobe, is gone.

I ask you to do me the great favor of advancing me three hundred dollars. I shall be out of hospital in a week or ten days at most and I want to return at once. Immediately I get back to Kobe I shall send you a draft in repayment. You must do this for me, Randolph, as I have no one else to turn to. Unless I can get back I am stranded and my only alternative will be to beat my way back to New York, which is the last thing I want to do. Please let me hear from you by wire that you'll do this.

Faithfully,

JIM PENDLETON.

The impudent blackmailing scoundrel! His only alternative will be New York. That is his threat, and as a threat he means it. Yet I would send him the money willingly if only I were sure that he would really use it

for passage to Kobe or to the devil — so long as it is far enough away. But what security have I?

Nevertheless it comes to me sadly that I shall have to take the risk and send him the money. To have Pendleton in New York again — at any cost I must take any chance to prevent that. And arrant blackmailer that he is, he understands that!

What could he do if he were here? The children? Though all minors, the two eldest are old enough to choose and I believe I am secure in my feelings as to their choice. He will not, moreover, be charging himself with the responsibility of the children, if only I seem indifferent enough as to whether he takes them or not. Alicia he is powerless to touch. Oh, I have learned something of the weapons needed to fight such a beast. But it is his hateful presence that I cannot stomach the thought of. And that he knows also. I must send him the money and take the chance that he will really return to his accustomed lairs. It will be an uneasy time for a while, nevertheless. But too much ease would now sit queerly upon my shoulders.

I shall send him the money.

CHAPTER XXIV

I HAVE had a week of illness and it has been the happiest of my life.

Alicia has been my nurse and no one, I fervently hope, will ever discover that the larger half of that week has been sheer malingering. I might have got up in three days!

> 'Tis late to hearken, late to smile,
> But better late than never
> I shall have lived a little while,
> Before I die forever.

The Shropshire Lad was perfectly right in the two middle lines of his quatrain, but oddly wrong in the others. It was *not* late to hearken or to smile. It never is late. Every moment has been heavenly for me. And who ever stops to dwell upon Purgatory once he has entered Paradise? I am very certain that by a law of spiritual physics past suffering is wiped out without a trace.

If "The Rosary" were not so absurd I should sing it to myself over and over. But being constructively a convalescent why may I not be absurd? Who shall say me nay? So being alone, I am humming the tune of "The Rosary" over and over and taking my pleasure in it.

The hours I have spent with Alicia no one can take from me. What a petulant patient I have been! I

chuckle as I think of it. It's like *Felix Culpa.* Happy grippe-cold!

Alicia, let us say, brings me some broth upon a tray.

"Will you be comfortable, Uncle Ranny," she asks with concern in her voice, "until I come back with the rest?"

"No!" growls the eccentric uncle. "Not a bit of it. I want company while I eat."

Alicia laughs softly.

"But who is going to prepare the other tray, while Griselda is so busy?"

"Don't care," mutters the grouchy invalid. "I want company. If I let you go now, will you bring up your own luncheon and eat it here?"

"But that makes such a lot of dishes, Uncle Ranny."

"Don't care. I'm obstinate, fussy, irritable, sick. Have to be humored. Ask the doctor!"

Alicia peals a delicious silvery laugh and then I see a film as of tears in her eyes.

"All right — I'll humor you, Uncle Ranny. But I should think you'd be sick of seeing me round by this time!"

"Am sick," growl I. "Get a colored nurse to-morrow!" Whereupon I hear Alicia's laughter all the way down the stairs.

I wonder why Griselda's Scotch broth tastes so amazingly delicious these days. Is it possible that an invalid's palate is more sensitive to culinary virtues and savors? I must ask the doctor.

On the little table at my bedside lies the Valdarfer Boccaccio, printed 1471, which Andrews, excellent fellow, had bought at a sale in my absence and, thrice excellent fellow, brought up for my delectation when he came to visit the sick. I once spent a delightful week in the British Museum, virtually under guard, examining

that rare and beautiful volume. Now its only replica in America is near me and I ought to be feasting all my senses upon its vellum-bound richness and beauty. It was once the property of a Medici and has delighted the hours of popes, princes, dukes, lords; men have longed for it, have treasured it, loved it as men treasure and love diamonds or women. It is worth a moderate fortune. But I leave it neglected. I am waiting for the rattle of a tray and the entrance of the girl behind the tray. What would Rosenbach or any decent bookman say if they knew? But I don't care. Boccaccio himself would have approved me.

Alicia enters and the room is flooded with sunshine and I am quick with life.

"Why, Uncle Ranny!" Alicia pauses alarmed, tray in hand. "Do you think you have fever again? Your eyes are so bright!"

"'The better to see you with,' said the wolf," I mutter and turn away.

"And your cheeks are red." She puts down the tray, ignoring my nonsense.

"Let me feel if they are hot," she persists anxiously and her cool fingers barely touch my cheek which I hastily draw aside.

"I have no fever, I tell you, Alicia," I murmur irritably. "I am ravenous. Food, child — food is my craving. Sit down and eat — and let me eat."

"Very well, dear grouchy Uncle Ranny," answers Alicia, cheerfully placing my dishes on the invalid's table suspended over the counterpane and leaving her own on the tray. "It shall eat to its heart's content, it shall — this nice chop and this lovely muffin, and this luscious jam — greasing its little fisteses up to its little wristeses, the dirty little beasteses!"

Whereupon I am in good humor again.

"Have you looked over this Valdarfer Boccaccio at all?" asks Alicia lightly, by way of making conversation. I nod.

"Isn't it a love?" I nod again.

"What a history that book has had — and you know every detail of it, I suppose. All the princes and kings who owned it — all the romance it has accumulated in nearly five hundred years — don't you?"

"Don't I what?"

'Know about it?"

"Oh, yes."

"Look here," cries Alicia with mock anger, "don't *you* go and become a blatant materialist thinking only of money and profits — like all the rest of the world. That would be horrible, Uncle Ranny — when I've been adoring you so abjectly because even your business is lovely and intellectual and romantic!"

And that girl is betrothed to my nephew Randolph! flashes through my mind. Aloud I say with a faint grin meant to exasperate her:

"Who on earth cares for anything but money?"

That she very properly ignores and in a softer, more serious tone, she murmurs:

"I came across a little rhyme of Goethe's — '*Kophtisches Lied.*' Do you remember it? — 'Upon Fortune's great scale the index never rests. You must either rise or sink, rule and win, or serve and lose; suffer or triumph, be anvil or hammer.' Isn't it lovely?"

"Yes. Did you translate that in your head as you went along?" I ask.

"Yes, Uncle Ranny — and you have triumphed over Goethe's wisdom. You have always triumphed even when you suffered — you have always been you, through all your troubles — Salmon and Byrd — Visconti's. You don't know how I, too, lived through all those things

— even when I was a child and hardly dared to speak to you — I was, oh, so anxious — and so glad when you seemed to be happy. And even now — oh, it's been so wonderful to watch you!" The tears fill her eyes and she turns her face from me. "That's been my life."

"You little witch!" my heart cries out dumbly, in a very ache of tenderness. "And have you been mothering me in your thoughts all these years as you have mothered the children?"

"No, Alicia — I haven't triumphed," I whisper huskily. "But I am triumphing now."

She turns toward me again with a smile of misty radiance. By an effort I control my voice and launch out briskly:

"Did I ever tell you, Alicia, how I nearly owned the priceless copy of his Essays that Bacon inscribed and gave to Shakespeare?"

I am well again — and therefore solitary. It is little enough I have seen of my nephew Randolph during my illness and little that Alicia has seen of her fiancé.

This being a Saturday when Randolph is at home, Alicia stopped him as he was about to leave the house to go to New York, "on business," as my "conditioned" Sophomore put it, and firmly proposed a walk with her instead. He demurred, the egregious whelp, demurred to a walk with Alicia! I surprised a note that was almost pleading beneath the bright decision — Alicia pleading to be taken for a walk! I could have trounced the boy in my hot indignation.

They departed — I saw them depart. They were in the obscure little hall and my door was open. Alicia waved her hand, smiling. "Just a wee bit walk!" she called out in Griselda's language. She could not have known the tug of longing and envy with which my heart

and spirit followed her as my body felt suddenly and disconsolately heavy against the chair.

"Have a good time," I waved my hand back, "and greet the spring for me!"

The birds are reappearing and an enterprising family of wrens are already building urgently over my window. Robins are courting and strutting. The trees are tender with leaf and the throb of spring is in the air like a mighty force, ceaseless, slow, careless, yet all-penetrating. The morning sun was bathing all the world in the very elixir of youth. A fly was buzzing madly against the pane. I felt intensely solitary, poignantly alone.

The Valdarfer Boccaccio lay opened on my desk — but he was four and a half centuries removed from this sunlight. I almost hated it — hated all the beloved objects about me. My precious books were dumb, inert, a clog upon all the senses. With a heart passionately hungry I craved for youth, freshness, activity. I seized the Valdarfer Boccaccio as though to hurl it from me. Then, restraining myself, I brought it down on the table with a bang that nearly shattered its precious binding. I laughed ruefully. I determined on a sudden to greet the spring for myself.

Griselda came bustling as she heard me rattling the canes in the jar.

"You're going out?" she demanded.

"Yes, Griselda." I am always a little apologetic with Griselda, for did she not know me as a boy? It is a part of the instinctive clutching at youth that makes us respect our elders. That puts them at once in their own elderly world. Besides, Griselda is always in the right.

"Then why did ye not go with the bairns?"

"*They* didn't want anybody with them," and I winked Spartan-wise — I can wink at Griselda. Has she not spent her life serving me? In this rare world you can do anything to people who love you enough.

"Havers!" muttered Griselda, with an enigmatic toss of her old head. "Then see that ye take your light coat."

"A coat to-day?" I protested.

"Aye — a coat to-day, young man!"

"Call me young man again, and I'll don goloshes and fur mittens," I challenged her.

"Child, I should have called ye," murmured Griselda, fumbling at the hook upon which my top coat hung.

"I'll put on rubber boots and a sou'wester for that," I told her and struggled into the sleeves as she held the garment out for me.

"I wouldna go too far to-day," cautioned Griselda. "Ye're not over strong yet."

"Just a little way," I mumbled, ashamed at her affection and care for one so worthless. "Thank you, Griselda!" She would have been shocked and scandalized had she known that at that moment there was a moderate lump in my throat and that I all but kissed her brown old face.

How much the spring had advanced during my days of imprisonment! The grasses were assertively green as though they had never been otherwise. Birds were twittering. Neighbors, or opulent neighbors' gardeners, were busy at their flower beds, and early blooms in some of them, transplanted from boxes or hothouses — violets, hyacinths, daffodils, cried forth their beauties in a way to make my breath catch. Queer, hungering, clamorous sensations stirred in my emaciated frame. How well I understood at that instant Verlaine's unshed tears of the heart when he sang:

Mon Dieu, mon Dieu, la vie est la,
Simple et tranquille
Cette paisible rumeur—la
Vient de la ville.

—Qu'as tu fait, o toi que voila
Pleurant sans cesse,
Dis, qu'as-tu fait, toi que voila
De ta jeunesse?

That bitterly anguished cry of the heart: What have you made of your youth?

I strode on grimly in a sort of nameless anger, past the outlying houses, past empty lots with rank grass still awaiting the pressure of habitation, until the futilely laid-out streets, empty of all life, gave way to open country and meadowland. I was making my way to the wood that lies between the meadows, a skirting dairy farm or two, some scraggy orchard here and there, and the great line of the aqueduct, the most Roman of our enterprises, that carries the water to New York. In the wood I somehow felt I should be taken again to the bosom of earth and the sickness of my soul be healed.

I looked up at the sky and it was radiant with dazzling white clouds that made my mole's eyes water. A merry breeze fanned the newborn earth and once on the edge of the wood I caught that indescribable whisper of trees which to me is the earth-note, the age-long speech and intimation of the planet that, at all hazards, life must go on; that it is decreed, irresistible and sweet. A pang of envy stabbed my breast at the thought of the lovers abroad to-day, even though those lovers were almost my children. I for one find it difficult to keep apart those conflicting emotions of the heart. But do parents of the flesh, I wonder, encounter no similar struggles? Once among the trees I was permeated by that type of gentle

melancholy serenity that woods induce. Softly I strolled about on last year's pine needles and leaves, sodden now after a winter's snowfall and a year's rains. The cat-like tread of your primeval aborigine returns even to your civilized boots in the Woods of Westermain, the stalker and the hunter throbs faintly in your blood.

My path led me up a slope where the trees, youngish still, like myself, were no saplings, however, but towered in a slender abandon toward the patches of cerulean sky overhead. They seemed to escort me, those tapering maples and sycamores with their feathery foliage, like a troop of young monks still fresh from their novitiate, still full of the sap of life. Somehow trees in a forest have always reminded me of monks chanting litanies and benedictions. The bass-note of all their murmurings is invariably so solemn. From the crest the land drops in a declivity and thence, soon abandoning the woodland in a fringe of bushes and underbrush, rolls on to the massive moundlike line of the aqueduct.

On a sudden I heard voices beneath me a little way down the declivity. And peering down with the delicious thrill of alertness that returns from primitive ages even to-day among trees, I perceived Alicia and Randolph with their backs to me in earnest colloquy.

My first impulse, naturally, was to hail them or to make some sort of monitory sound that might apprise them of my presence. But a sudden movement of Alicia's arrested all force or motion on my part.

Her hands shot forward and with a vehemence that was obviously not loverlike, she cried out in a tormented voice:

"But you've promised me that over and over again, 'Dolph! How many times" — she unconsciously shook him as she spoke, "how many times do you suppose you have promised me that you wouldn't drink and wouldn't

play — that you'd give up going about with that set — that you'd leave it altogether? How many, many times?" she reiterated, with a pathetic note of indignation.

"A fellow can't quit cold like that," I barely heard the lad muttering — "got to have some friends!"

"Friends!" Alicia cried, in a voice of bitter exasperation. "Do you call Billy Banning and Tertius Cullen and Arthur Bloodgood friends? They're your worst enemies — almost criminals!" And on a sudden I realized that I was an eavesdropper and a flush of shame heated my cheeks. I was about to make a sound but my throat was dry and no sound came.

"Think what it would mean," took up Alicia, "if Uncle Ranny found it out — " and I could not choose but listen — "all that he has been to us — father and mother and everything else. Everything in the world he has given up for us," she cried with quivering lips, her voice thinning with passionate anguish. "His comfort, his leisure, his whole life he has sacrificed with a smile for us — for you and Jimmie and Laura and — and even me! Oh, 'Dolph, 'Dolph — do you suppose there are many such men in the world? And you want to break his heart by drinking and gambling and Heaven knows what else it might lead to?"

I write these words with shame. I had no business to hear them. I gathered my arrested forces to compel myself to move away, when I heard the boy's bass mutter:

"I know I'm rotten, 'Licia — rotten as they make 'em — but give me another chance, 'Licia — just one more, sweetheart — I tell you it's — "

"Yes," was the bitter interruption, "you made me those promises when I said I would be engaged to you — what have they amounted to? It would have broken his

heart if it had come out then. I — I promised the Dean for you — that time — " her voice charged with emotion so she could scarcely speak — " and now — "

" But wait — wait, 'Licia," the boy suddenly drew her to him with passionate earnestness by both hands. " I give you my word of honor this time it's different. It isn't for myself — yes, it is, though — but it isn't for what you mean — not for anything you can think of. It is for a Purpose," he explained with great emphasis — " a Purpose — I can't tell you — but — "

" But you must tell me," insisted Alicia, searching his eyes tremulously.

" Can't — I can't! " he shook his head vehemently. " 'Licia, darling, be good to me. I must have it. If I only had about fifty dollars! I could win it — I know — I am awfully good at poker — I can bluff the lot of 'em. But I've got to have ten to start — and I promise, word of honor, I'll never play again — word of honor, 'Licia."

It was too late now for me to betray my presence. I was contemptible in my own eyes, ashamed, yet exultant — I hardly knew what. My frame shook with a cold rage, with shame at my blindness, and yet a curious sense of vast illumination surrounded me like an atmosphere. I moved away, hardly knowing or caring whether I made any sound, and with bowed head and a tumult throbbing hot and cold within me, I walked down the slope through the still whispering woods.

What I had long fitfully suspected was now somewhat darkly apparent: In some manner Alicia was endeavoring to stand between the boy and evil, shame, disgrace, sacrificing herself deliberately, resolutely, without a word to me — because it might " break my heart! " Through an empty barren landscape, with unseeing eyes, conscious only of a welter of incoherent thoughts and emotions, as

though boiling in a vacuum, I made my way homeward. It might "break my heart!"

"And did ye walk too far?" Griselda came hurriedly to the entrance hall when she heard me.

"No — no! Greatest walk of my life," I laughed absently into her face. "Feel like another man."

She scrutinized me sharply for an instant, and muttering something about a cup of cocoa and a biscuit, whisked away to the kitchen.

Dumb, distraught, I fell wearily into my chair, gazing vacantly at the rows of books, at the telephone instrument, the safe, the furniture and cushions, at all the apparatus of living about me, realizing clearly only one thing: that it is the simple basal things of life that alone tend to elude one. For years I had been clinging to them, faint but pursuing, but still they were eluding me. Still I was a groping elementary learner in life. Rage and depreciate myself as I would, I felt nevertheless that I was facing a problem momentarily beyond me, but which I urgently knew I must solve. If I had been blind, I could not continue blind. Suddenly, thought suspended as a bird sometimes hangs in the air, I seemed to be watching instinct taking command, instinct overriding thought and shame, rage and grief — instinct taking a pen and a cheque book and writing with my hand a check in Alicia's name for fifty dollars. Why was my hand doing this? A slight tremor of revulsion shook me before this trivial deed accomplished — and I made a movement as though to destroy the cheque I had written. But I did not destroy it. I sat gazing at it stupidly, as one might sit before a puzzle.

Griselda at this point entered with a tray bearing cocoa and biscuits.

"Oh, thanks, Griselda," I murmured, as one emerging from a trance. "By the way, I wish you wouldn't men-

tion to Alicia or — anybody, my having walked this morning." Griselda uttered a brief laugh. Then — "Did ye see them?" she queried abruptly.

"See them?" I repeated dully. "What a question for you to ask, Griselda! If I had seen them would I ask you not to mention it?"

"Oh, ay — surely — I am a fool!" muttered Griselda, slowly turning to leave me. But her expression was not that of one chastened in her folly.

"Is Jimmie in the house?" I asked.

"No, Jimmie is across the way playing with the Sturgis boy."

"Very well, Griselda. Thank you."

A few minutes later Alicia entered the house — alone.

I rose heavily and walked toward the open door leading to the hallway. Her drooping dispirited look struck me like a blow — my radiant Alicia! Even her pretty small hat that I admired seemed to squat listlessly upon her beautiful head — beautiful even in dejection. But no sooner did she perceive me approaching than she looked up and smiled piteously.

"Oh, hello, Uncle Ranny —" but the usual sparkle in her tone was sadly lacking — "have you been all right?" She removed her hat.

"Oh, quite — thanks, Alicia. But a little lonely. Won't you come in and talk to me, if you have nothing better to do?"

"Of course I shall, you poor Uncle Ranny —" and her tone became more hearty. "What have you been doing with yourself all alone — ?" And I realized that endearments were trembling on the tip of her tongue and my soul craved them, but I interrupted her. She had had enough that morning. And the endearments of pity would have crushed me utterly.

"Oh, there's Boccaccio," I muttered, "and puttering

about generally — at which I'm an expert. Sit down," I added, as she entered the study. "Am I mistaken, or did you tire yourself out walking too far?"

"Oh, no, dear — I had a lovely walk," she answered brightly. "Don't you go wasting sympathy on me. I feel ashamed of my robustiousness, and you convalescing here alone. But I shan't leave you alone again to-day. Wouldn't you like me to read some Boccaccio to you? — But then my Italian is so ferocious, and yours is so beautiful, you'd hate me if I clipped the vowels too short."

She had thus far made no mention of Randolph.

So full did my heart feel of love and sympathy for this poor beautiful child struggling alone with her problem and pain that I ached to take her to my heart, to beg her to confide in me, to let me share her troubles. A lump rose in my throat and I knew that one movement in her direction would make all my manhood dissolve in tears like a child! No, I must not — I could not.

"Read me," I whispered huskily, after a pause, "two or three of the sonnets in the 'Vita Nuova' of Dante."

"Lovely!" cried Alicia, jumping up and seizing the book.

"*A ciascun alma presa,*" she began — "to every captive soul and gentle heart . . . greeting in the name of their Lord, who is love!"

I did not listen after the first stanza. I endeavored only to still the tumult in my brain and to think what to do for Alicia.

Somehow, some way, I must put an end at once to this beloved child's torment — without causing her pain.

Three sonnets she had read, or possibly four, and then she paused and searched my face.

"Do you want any more?"

"Thank you very much, Alicia, I feel brighter already. I think that will be enough for to-day. By the way

Alicia," I went on rapidly, fumbling with my papers, "it strikes me your allowance is too small. You must need dozens and dozens of things that cost money. Here is a cheque for fifty dollars I wrote out this morning — but," I added half absently — "if you need more I can just as easily make it a hundred," and I laughed a trifle foolishly — oh, I could act, this morning, act almost as well as Alicia.

She gazed at me intently for a space, silent, alert — a flash of suspicion — and then with an ineffable tenderness and a great relief shining in her eyes.

"Oh, you darling Uncle Ranny," she leaped from her chair and flew toward me, pressing both her hands down on my shoulders. Immobile as a Buddha I sat as she kissed me on the cheek.

"But do you really think you can — give me all this?"

"Oh, yes, Alicia," I laughed with the bravado of Fred Salmon. "I am quite sure I can. What are uncles for if —" but I could say no more.

She hung over me for an instant and then abruptly left me. She, too, was fearful of saying more. But not for the same reason — oh, not for the same reason!

All that day, Alicia, as I could not help overhearing, was vainly endeavoring to reach Randolph on the telephone in New York. She rang the fraternity house. She tried the homes of his friends. But all to no purpose. Randolph was not to be found. And that evening Alicia mounted the stairs to her room with a sort of drooping, febrile anxiety, with an anxious unnatural gayety.

CHAPTER XXV

Only some fifteen hours have passed and the world is changed to a dazzling brilliance.

Alicia would not leave me, poor overwrought child. She has refused to go to bed and insisted upon staying near me, upon "meeting the dawn" with me. She now lies stretched upon my couch, covered over with a rug, and she has just been overtaken by slumber.

And her presence there under my eyes, Randolph Byrd, is the nearest taste of Heaven that you and I have known, or possibly ever will know, in this life. It is dawn enough for me now and for you, my friend — a dawn so resplendent that I for one shall never desire a brighter.

And since there can be no more sleep for me this night, and since this may be the last entry for you in these memoirs, for many a day, if not forever, I shall endeavor to still the flying heart, the mad exultation rioting in my veins, by noting down for you, how sketchily and incoherently soever, the momentous occurrences of the youngest hours.

It came about — but has it come about? Or is this some mad dream from which I shall wake to the old somber reality? How can a dark turbid current so suddenly bring one out into a flashing, sparkling, sunlit lagoon, overhung with a verdure so rich and lustrous it would seem to have come fresh from the Creator's hand? Do I hear birds piping in wondrous music, or do I imagine it? But I began by telling you I should be incoherent.

It must have been some time past midnight when I screened the fire, put out the lights and wearily, in darkness, made my way up the stairs.

The fire had unaccountably and fitfully smoked tonight and I remember the last thing I did was to take out Fred Salmon's gold-colored certificates from the safe, examine them with smarting eyes and then gaze in sleepy astonishment at the quotation of Salmon Oil in the newspapers. According to that the shares were now worth twenty-six thousand dollars! It seemed incredible, absurd. And the year was up and I might sell the stuff. Like a miser who has nothing else in life to look for, I gazed spellbound at those securities in whose security I even now could not believe. But unlike the miser of fiction, but like my dull, stupid self, I neglected to replace the crackling papers, though I did put the Valdarfer Boccaccio in and closed the safe.

In the upper passageway, I distinctly recall walking on tiptoe so that Alicia might not be disturbed. Was it hallucination I wonder, or did I actually hear like a sighing whisper through the darkness,

"Good night, Uncle Ranny!"

I am always imagining her voice and her gestures in my brain. I must ask her when she wakes up. At any rate, that mysterious whisper it was, or the hallucination of a whisper, that stirred me into wakefulness again. I began to undress and paused, realizing that I was now too wakeful to sleep. I donned a dressing gown over my waistcoat, adjusted the light and lay down upon the bed with Baudelaire's "Fleurs de Mal" in my hand. A little of Baudelaire had the effect upon my mind of rich food upon a furred tongue. Why, I wondered, do I keep that gloomy book upon my bedside table? I threw it down in disgust and took up a volume of Florio's Montaigne instead.

To read and enjoy Montaigne is a certain sign of middle age. I have long enjoyed Montaigne. A French verse to the effect that "a peaceful indifference is the sagest of virtues" came into my head and with sudden violence I threw away Montaigne.

I was not middle-aged. I was not indifferent. The heart of frustrated youth in me was crying out for life and love! Alicia was two doors away from me. She did not love my nephew. Could I not, if I plucked up energy and resolution, make her love me? Was I then so irrevocably Uncle Ranny? I leaped up feverishly, lifted the shade and looked out upon the blinking stars. Their message was a very simple one. From Virgo to Cassiopeia, from the Pole star to the farthest twinkler they seemed to say:

"The trifling planet Earth is yours — if you know how to use it."

With a muffled tread I paced the room agitatedly. This affair between Alicia and Randolph was absurd. Randolph was unfit for the very thought of marriage. A wise parent would know how to deal with the situation. But, alas! I was neither wise nor a parent. Nevertheless I must find a way of liquidating this business not later than to-morrow. It could not go on. The lamplight showed me in my dull perplexity and I turned it off angrily and again threw myself on the bed to think in Egyptian darkness.

On a sudden I heard a low murmur of voices without. It is seldom that voices are heard late at night in our secluded situation. Possibly the policeman exchanging comments on the night with some solitary passer-by. A moment later, however, I heard a key inserted in a lock and a door open. My nephew Randolph returning home at last! Then to-morrow would be the same? I asked myself. Alicia would turn over the cheque to him and

all would go on as before? No, no, that could not be. Yet what could I do? Turn the boy adrift, Laura's boy, and revolt Alicia's spirit — make her hate me? What a horrible impasse!

I listened for Randolph's footsteps on the stairs, but there was no sound. Suppose I were to call him into my room and tell him that I knew all — appeal to his better nature. Was not that what parents were obliged to do the world over? I should talk tenderly to the boy — but in my heart I own I did not feel tenderly toward him.

Still there was no sound of steps on the stairs.

The black darkness made the tension of waiting intolerable. I switched on the light and automatically made toward the door. Then all at once the low hum of voices overtook me. Had Alicia descended to meet him? No — I had not heard her door. Surely Randolph in his sober senses would not bring friends of his to the house at this hour! I looked at my watch; it was twenty minutes past two!

Noiselessly I opened my door and in the soft moccasin slippers I was wearing tiptoed down the hall. At the top of the stairs I paused to listen. Primeval instincts of alertness stirred within me. My heart was throbbing against my throat and I literally felt my eyes dilating in the darkness. I found myself smiling at the primitive machinery that is set in motion within us, slumber though it might, at the slightest provocation. Still treading softly I descended the stairs.

No light was showing anywhere. The darkness was absolute. What under heaven could be the meaning of that? The primitive instinct of the stalker was again to the fore. At the foot of the stairs I paused. Sounds were audible. They came from my study!

"Upon my word!" I thought with indignation. The

young man could not possibly be in his right mind. The study door was closed, but through the slightest of chinks between door and lintel, left evidently to obviate the noise of the clicking fixture, I perceived a faint, fitful spot of light flickering about, like the light of Tinker Bell in "Peter Pan."

With a slight pressure I pushed the door gently ajar.

Randolph, with a small spotlight in his hand, was standing at my desk. Except for the circle of light about him the room was in darkness. The rim of his hat shading his eyes, he was scanning the Salmon Oil certificates; with his trembling left hand he was counting them, under the quivering spot of light proceeding from his right.

"Eight — nine — ten!" I heard him breathe heavily. "A hundred each!"

I stood stock-still, overwhelmed, scarcely breathing, frozen with a sickening shame of horror. The meaning of it was so crushingly plain!

"Take two of them!" I heard a mysterious hoarse whisper coming from the window. "Put the rest back. He'll never miss 'em."

"All right," whispered Randolph, with quaking huskiness.

"Give 'em to me!" came from the window.

My power of motion at that instant suddenly flooded back into my muscles. I lifted my hand as though fearful of rending the darkness, pushed the switch-button inside the door and the room was bathed in light from the single lamp on my table — intense after the pregnant darkness.

Then a vision that sent a chill shock through my nerves and stunned all senses left me gaping — petrified.

In the window was framed the abhorrent, dilapidated parody of the face of Pendleton!

It could not be! was the thought sluggishly struggling through my numbed brain. It was a nightmare.

Then a sudden sharp cry threw me into a momentary tremor. I wheeled about.

Alicia, fully dressed, with one hand to her eyes, was leaning against the doorpost!

Without speaking, I automatically bounded forward to the window. The muffled sound of heavy steps running on the turf fell upon my ears and dimly, through the starlit darkness, I caught a glimpse of the stooping bulk of a large man receding down the slope, toward the brook.

Had my senses been tricking me or had I really seen the face of Pendleton?

"Who was it?" I cried fiercely to Randolph, still hanging stupefied and immobile, with blank terror upon his features, over my desk.

He made no answer.

"Sit down over there!" I commanded sharply. As one under the influence of a drug or a hypnotic spell, the boy loosely moved to obey, but remained standing irresolute at my chair, a mass of helplessness, his head dropping limply on his chest.

Anger and pain struggling for mastery within me, I turned abruptly to Alicia.

"Haven't you been asleep, child? Better go upstairs — please go," I entreated.

"No, I won't!" she retorted with a cry of passionate vehemence and with a rush she flung past me toward Randolph.

"So that is what you wanted the money for!" — she shook with the fury of her emotion — "to give to that brute! And he has got you — got hold of you — come back to make a thief of you!"

Then it *was* Pendleton. I was not mistaken!

"Why do you suppose I engaged myself to you, you poor contemptible weakling! Do you suppose I am in love with you?" Her tears gushed forth and she rocked her arms passionately. "Love a thing like you? I wanted to keep your weakness and your spinelessness from Uncle Ranny — to save him from the pain he is suffering now because you're a thief! You promised, promised me over and over you'd keep straight — wouldn't gamble — wouldn't drink — over and over — " she wailed with the anguished note that drags on tears — "and this is what you've got to! Stealing! And from Uncle Ranny of all people, who's been father and mother to you — everything in the world! If I didn't adore him more than anybody on earth, do you think I would have looked at you? Oh, how I wish I could beat you to a pulp!" She lifted her hands on high and for one fascinated instant I actually thought she would.

"I wish I could feel sure of never seeing your face again!" she concluded, collapsing with her own anger.

Slowly, under the blows of her words, the boy lifted his eyes, eyes smoldering with shame, with abject misery, with the hopeless pathos of the weak.

"Then you never cared a damn?" he muttered.

"No — I never cared a damn — in your sense!" she cried, forgetting all restraint in her passionate exasperation. "And I never can and never will now. I'd hoped you'd become a man. But I'm through with you for good!"

I had been standing aside, awed, involuntarily spellbound with the aloofness and indecision of surprise. I now made a move toward Alicia, to lead her away. "If I didn't adore him more than anybody on earth." I ought not to have heard that. But I had and my pulses began to throb anew.

A sudden loud rapping at the door, however, startled

us all out of our tempest of pain into a common alertness. I glanced at the huddled form of Randolph, at the still quivering figure of Alicia.

"I'll see who it is!" I muttered, moving toward the hall. Alicia stood for a moment irresolute, and then ran out behind me and disappeared in the darkened dining room.

"What," it flashed through my mind as I unlocked the door, "what if Pendleton was caught — the father of Laura's children, snatched like the thief he was, in his flight?"

And I felt the prickling sensation of sweat against my clothes as I swung open the door.

The mounted policeman, Halloran, was looming in the doorway. He was clutching by the arm a hulking figure in a shabby top coat, a man, a man panting like a beast, who was shrinkingly, miserably averting his face from the light.

"I saw this man running away from your house just now," began Halloran briskly. "Mighty suspicious, he looked — running away this hour of the night. Picked him up — to see if they was anything wrong."

I peered at the indistinct features of the man.

It was the dissipated ashen-white, almost leprous face of Pendleton.

With an incredible swiftness I felt my mental machinery working. Something must be done. All hate of him and all fear of him vanished from my mind before a faint lucid beam of a sort of indolent humor.

"That you, Jim?" I queried, peering more closely. "Hello, Jim!" I greeted him in a jocund undertone, bringing my voice round, with a great effort, to a pitch of naturalness.

"No, officer," I went on glibly. "Nothing wrong. This man was here on a business matter. Left late.

Running for a train, I suppose — weren't you, Jim?"

"Yes," came hoarsely from Pendleton, and a quiver of triumph ran down my spine.

"There'll be a train — let's see —" I fumbled. The policeman glanced quizzically from one to the other of us, then shrewdly interposed:

"Train to N'York at three-seven. No use running," he grinned. My ear, hypersensitive at that moment, seemed still to catch a note of doubt in the zealous constable's voice. And when I longed to fling out, in the words of the ballad —

> He is either himsel' a devil frae hell,
> Or else his mother a witch maun be,

I heard myself saying calmly, "Thank you, officer." Then to Pendleton:

"Don't you want to come in and spend the night after all, Jim?"

"No, I better go," mumbled Pendleton, edging away.

"Sorry to have troubled you, gentlemen," apologized Halloran suavely. "But you know — so many robberies in the suburbs — orders is to look out extry sharp. Good night to ye, Mr. Byrd. Good night, sir," he nodded with ill-concealed contempt at Pendleton.

"Good night," muttered Pendleton and slouched off heavily down the gravel path.

"No harm done," grinned Halloran, looking queerly after his recent prisoner. "But I could have sworn —" I interrupted him with a boisterous laugh.

"Not at all, officer. Sorry you had the trouble — many thanks for your watchfulness. See you tomorrow."

"All right!" he responded with smart alacrity. "Good night, sir." I closed the door.

In the room the lad Randolph sat alone, somewhat

straighter now, gazing before him. He must have heard the colloquy at the door.

"Well, Randolph," I approached him quietly, "now what do you want to say to me?"

He did not answer for a space. Finally he spoke:

"What are you going to do with me, Uncle Ranny?"

My anger against him had subsided. I saw only the frail young mortal, Laura's son, whom I had undertaken to make a man of — and I had failed!

"What do you think I ought to do with you?" I queried gently. There was no longer even rancor in my heart.

"Put me away, I guess," he answered dully. "That's what I deserve."

"When did you first meet your — your father?" I found myself wincing at the word, but after all Pendleton *was* his father.

"About three weeks ago," was the reply.

"How did it happen?"

"He came here and followed 'Licia and me to town one morning on the train. He watched for me till I came out of lecture and then he spoke to me."

"What did he say?"

"Oh, asked whether I'd forgotten him, took me to lunch and told me you gave him a rotten deal — took his children away from him — sent him into exile, and so on."

"Didn't he tell you that he deserted your mother and you three children and that your mother died of it?"

"No," said Randolph wearily, "but I knew that. Oh, you needn't think I took to him right off the bat."

"Didn't he tell you that he went away of his own desire — after a horrible scene with — with Alicia?" I felt the truth must be told the boy now. "Didn't he tell you that I gave him money to go and that only re-

cently I sent him more money to San Francisco, because he wanted to get back to the East?"

"No," said the boy in wide-eyed amazement. "He said you had taken everything from him because of the mistake he'd made — and tried to keep him down. That's what first began to get me. Oh, what's the use, Uncle Ranny? It's a hard thing to say, but I guess he's pretty rotten, even if he is my father. He got me drunk to-night to do this —" he waved his hand heavily toward the desk. "Said there was some island he'd found where he wanted to raise copra or cocoanuts or something — end his days — if he only had a little money — that's why.— But what's the use, Uncle Ranny," he went on in the same weary tones, "I'm through with him. I don't care a curse about him now. What are you going to do with me?"

A great tenderness for the boy stabbed at my heart. I longed to comfort him as I could comfort Laura or Jimmie. Was he not their brother and as much as they my child? Like a disease, misfortune and dishonor had suddenly attacked him. My breast was simmering with bitter self-reproach.

"Come, Randolph," I put my arm about his shoulder. "Pull yourself together. We must live this business down. There's your education to be thought of. You must finish, don't you see?"

"You mean — you'd give me another chance?"

"Yes, Randolph," I answered huskily, "and still another." At that moment I felt I could have given him seventy-times seven.

"Well, then," he answered, with the first gleam of interest I discerned in him, "will you let me go ahead and enlist?"

"Enlist," I recoiled from that. "In the army, you mean? You are so young."

"I mean in the navy — I want to do it, Uncle Ranny — I must do it — That's the only way I can begin again. I can't stay round where Alicia is."

My heart went utterly out to the boy in his misery. I knew not what to say to him. The pangs of despised love!

"Alicia has been your — " but it was futile to talk to him of Alicia.

"Go to bed, my boy," I said, gently urging him toward the door. "Get some rest and still your poor nerves. To-morrow we shall discuss and settle this matter in your best interests. Remember you are surrounded by your friends." With a faint gleam of gratitude in his eyes, he shuffled out unsteadily and I pressed his hand as we parted at the door. I heard him moving about in his room.

Then I realized that I must find Alicia.

CHAPTER XXVI

TREADING speedily with a strange lightness of step, I mounted the stairs first to see whether Alicia might have returned to her room, as was natural, and found her door ajar and the apartment empty.

My brain still wheeling, I seemed to float down the stairway and into the dining room, but no one was there. Somewhat uneasily I passed through the narrow box-like pantry into the kitchen and there the door that gave on the garden stood open wide.

In the shadow, under the starlit sky, under the mystical blue of overhanging boughs, stood Alicia alone, gazing into the velvety night, straight as a silvery Diana, mysterious, tragic.

At the sight of her the mad tumult of the evening seemed to ooze away from me in waves. By an effort of will I forced my heart to beat more soberly, as I approached her softly.

"Alicia!" I whispered behind her so as not to startle her. Slowly she turned toward me.

Her face was but dimly discernible but her eyes shone in the night with the brightness of the stars. The one thought of my heart was to bring Alicia back to the life of the past, to wipe out as swiftly as possible the ravages of the emotional storm, to bring her back to the tranquil blissful life that her happy presence made for me. A sad Alicia was unthinkable.

"You must come in, my child!" I touched her gently.

"I have tried so hard, Uncle Ranny," she turned her

face and laid a hand timidly upon my arm, "I have tried so hard to keep all this pain from you — so that you could go on being your happy, lovely self."

My own thoughts concerning her! She was giving them back to me — with the poignant wistful gloom, the intense pathos of the young that is so touching, in the young you love so lacerating. Did I ever say that there are no women to-day who wear the hair shirt, like the radiant girl wife of Jacopone da Todi? Blind fool that I have been!

"But my darling girl," I seized both her cold little hands, "don't worry about me. I am old and tough — seasoned to the fortunes of life — and to the misfortunes, too. It is sad, very sad, but it is nothing. It's you I am thinking of. Things happen, my dear. Life is like that. There is a lot of happiness and serenity in it. But you must not let this bite into your soul — it will pass, Alicia — it has passed already. I want you to return to your happy blissful self — the self that has made me — all of us — so happy — so very happy."

"I ask nothing more or better, Uncle Ranny," she pressed my hands with quick intense little movements, "than to be near you, to work and to — to serve you — that is all I ask in the world!"

Almost I had committed the unpardonable sin — almost I had taken advantage of her mood and of her grief, taken her to my heart and poured out the words of love that a hundred, hundred times had overflowed my heart and clamored for utterance. A pretty head of a family, a fine protector of the young I should then have been!

With a tremulous movement I put both her hands together between my own and whispered to her lest my voice should betray me.

"That is exactly what I want you to do, my dearest

girl — live quietly and happily near me, be happy until the — the supreme happiness comes to you — until — " I added with a painful laugh, " the Prince in the fairy tale — comes along — to claim you."

It was the hardest utterance of my life, but I felt a flash of triumph to have uttered it.

" The Prince in the fairy tale," Alicia repeated slowly, looking rapt before her, " he came long ago — I have had more than I deserve — so much, so much, that I often tremble to think of it. All the Prince and all the fairy tale I want, or shall ever want."

For one instant I thrilled from head to foot. A darkness filled my being for a moment and then it was rayed and forked by the lightnings of a strange intoxication.

" You can't mean, Alicia," I breathed huskily from a parched throat, " you — that it is me — that you — "

And I knew instantaneously that all the restraint and resolutions had been swept aside — that after all I was as weak and weaker than the boy Randolph. For I had spoken without the iota of a wish to resist my desires!

Slowly, very slowly, she drew closer to me so that her sweet breath of violets was warm and fragrant on my cheek. My head swam.

" Ever since I came to you;" she breathed ever so softly, " ever since I was fifteen, you have filled my thoughts, my heart, my life. I have — loved you always." The blood roared in my ears. I was filled with madness. But too long had I doubted happiness to receive it with open arms. I had made a stranger of it as does a miser by keeping his wealth hidden away.

" Think what you are saying, Alicia," I took her face convulsively in both my hands. " I have loved you beyond anything on earth, beyond life itself. I have dreamed of you, dwelt upon you until I am mad. Do

you really mean you can love me — as a man? After all those foolish years of hiding and suffering? Is that what you mean, or is it just — Uncle Ranny?"

"Yes — that is what I mean, my Prince of the fairy tale," she whispered, hiding her face against mine — "if you'll take me!"

My senses reeled and swooned. She was tightly gripped in my arms. I was straining her to my heart. The months, the years of love hunger charged through my veins and sinews like an inexorable force, remorseless, irresistible.

The margin of the garden was a few yards away but it might have been an infinity. The scant trees, countable upon the fingers of one hand, might have been a forest of congregated giants with their vast secret life brooding and sheltering us. Infinity and our small intense reality were merged and met. I felt coextensive with the vast majestic universe. I babbled broken words against her lips — I don't know what I babbled. For the vast majestic universe was locked in the circle of my arms.

"Let us go in, my darling," I murmured at last. "The dew is heavy and you must get your rest. I shall not attempt to sleep what remains of this night of nights."

"Nor I," replied Alicia dreamily. "I want to meet the dawn with you this morning. Isn't it marvelous, dearest, that in spite of everything, in spite of that poor boy in there," she added with a note of pathos, "we two can be so wildly happy?"

"Yes, my child, marvelous and awe-inspiring. But happiness is the first decree — the foremost law."

"I shall never be as wise as you, Uncle Ranny," she laughed softly, lingering in my arms. "There! I have

called you Uncle Ranny again. I am afraid — oh, so afraid, I shall always call you that!"

I sealed her lips.

"Oh, if that is all you're afraid of," I murmured in the tone of devout thanksgiving, "if that is all — let us go in, my own."

And now Alicia is waiting to meet the dawn with me.

Up, up, heart of my heart, star of my life, happiness, nearer to me than my own soul, fire-bringer, life-bringer — up, or I shall deify you in my mad folly. Up, up, my Alicia — for the dawn is breaking!

EPILOGUE

I HAVE been sitting in the shade of a trellis watching the miraculously mobile suspension of a humming bird over a cluster of honeysuckle blooms. That humming bird, whorl of triumphant aspiration that it is — aspiration of insect to become bird — seems in a manner to embody my life story.

For the humming bird the Golden Age is this perfect summer day, with its tendril and leaf, its beds of bleeding heart and bridal wreath, sweet William, larkspur and marigold and the heavy fragrant breath of honeysuckle. And so it is for me, also. No fable is deadlier to the human race, to human weal and human hope, than that same fable of the Golden Age. There never was an age one half so golden as the now, nor the infinitesimalest part so golden as the ages that await us. My son there, sleeping in his hammock under the tree, overhung by fine netting, Randolph Byrd, the younger, will see a more wondrous human life than any we have yet beheld.

Two years and more have passed since I have opened this record of yours, Randolph the Aged, and I open it now with a purpose, for a special and peculiar reason.

Alicia has chanced to see it and she fell upon it with a strange — to me inexplicable — delight. She desires me to " round it off ", as she puts it, to disguise it a trifle here and there as to names and places, and to publish it for the edification of mankind! If only we could appear to the world in the stature loving eyes see us! But laugh as I will at Alicia, she persists obstinately in her wish.

" But it was only meant as a memoir for a friend of

mine," I tell her, "who is daily growing nearer to me — to Randolph Byrd, aged seventy."

"Oh, no!" cries Alicia, looking with eyes shining with happiness and a face suddenly thrillingly transfigured at the sleeping baby in the hammock. "It is meant for another Randolph — Randolph the Young, over there, the pride and joy of his father — the hope of the world."

"It will hardly amuse him," I grunt.

"It will — won't it, Griselda?" says Alicia to our aged friend who at this moment emerges from the kitchen to consult with her mistress. Griselda looks mystified. "Say, yes — it's for Baby," urges Alicia cunningly.

"Oh, ay — if it's good for the bairn, I'll say it!"

Griselda, still vigorous, goes her way.

"One would think," I scoff, "you had found in the manuscript all the jests of Sancho Panza, falling like drops of rain."

"Jests!" mocks Alicia. "Who cares about jests, but the mysterious readers of comic supplements? I find in it the record of a beautiful love."

"But even love birds," I tease, "are only a species of parrot — though many think they're birds of paradise. Besides," I urge, "I should have to call the thing a novel — and this is only a fragment of life seen through two particular eyes and a very peculiar temperament. There is no contour to it, any more than there is to life itself. Were I a novelist, my dearest, I should not improbably make two or three novels of the stuff. I should at least assume the jolly privilege of playing destiny to all those people. All things and all persons should be rhythmically accounted for."

"Fudge!" says Alicia. "Don't be so cubist!" I ignore her modernism.

"Pendleton would not be left roaming about the world

with endless possibility of still blackmailing me and his children. Should he not have ended his existence on the third rail as he ran, the night of his last appearance? And his son, Randolph — would he not have met with a heroic and glorious end in France or at sea, instead of living a highly contented and commonplace life with the pretty Irish peasant girl he has brought from Queenstown — a mere ordinary decent automobile salesman? Would those people go on living in the unremarkable flowing manner of life? No, my heart," I continue soberly, "a story must be tricked and padded with tracery and decoration. And where is the bevy of young adventuresses at play — without which no novel is worthy of the name?"

In justice to Alicia, however, I must recall that Gertrude, of all the others, has emerged true to her form. She carries, I believe, besides the military title of Major, a decoration from every Allied Nation in Europe and at least two bestowed by reigning sovereigns. She drove out here in her handsome car to see us the other day and was much amazed by the sight of my infant son.

"What, Ranny!" she exclaimed with her usual freedom of speech, now enhanced by life in camp as well as court. "You've just brought up one family and you're starting out to get another? You surely are the original of the old woman who lived in a shoe. What a reactionary you are!"

"Reactionary? Yes, Gertrude," I smiled in reply, "I suspect I am — in some things. I hate poverty. I hate to think of city or country slums, of oppression, of disorder and uncleanliness — of lawless rich or unheeded poor. Possibly from among those I rear, some one will arise to fathom and solve these things. I am sure greater wisdom is slowly filtering into our lives. In many respects I am, as you charge, reactionary. I still have a

feeling that every human being must be a center of creative life — and that he who rears children is multiplying creators in the world — against the resplendent future!"

Gertrude laughed, a shade bitterly I thought, and waved her hand in a gesture of despair at my ancient stupidity. Perhaps I should not have prattled in this strain to Gertrude — more particularly since her recent husband, Minot Blackden, has followed the desire of his eyes elsewhere in Gertrude's absence, is now happily divorced and married to some one who shares his apartment, and is himself shamelessly begetting offspring!

No, Gertrude aside, there is no contour to my story. Dibdin, indeed, still appears and disappears, ever the Flying Dutchman, as of old. He is at home now and often sits and smokes in my study and moralizes — may I whisper it? — perhaps a shade more prosily than of old.

"The only devil in the world," he puffed out last night in his gruff manner, as though pronouncing somebody's doom, "the only devil is the darkness of chaos. Children are the gage the human race, wisely abetted by Nature, is throwing down to this devil."

"And supposing the children you rear should turn out to be 'nobodies'?" I mildly put in, as an obliging straw man.

"What does that matter?" he growled. "Most people are nobodies. It's the nobodies of the world that bring about its catastrophic changes. Mark Antony cunningly put a tongue in every wound of Cæsar's body in the Forum. Mark Antonys are rare, I grant you. But it's the First Citizen and Second Citizen who pulled down Republican Rome about the ears of Brutus. Shakespeare as well as Mark Antony knew that in the nobodies resides the real power for doing. The thinkers are the few; the doers are the many. We need 'em all, all — and that's what kids are for."

Perhaps I should own at this point that in my secret heart I agree with Dibdin, just as in reality I am certain that life has a contour and rhythm of its own. The world may appear harsh, may be truly ill-adapted for justice, culture, beauty. But whatever its shortcomings, the business of the human race in it seems to me clear: To extend and carry on the race of man — the measure of all things — to create a better life on earth. All the world is a man living in a shoe. But somehow, very slowly, it is acquiring knowledge, learning what to do. We may indeed be such stuff as dreams are made on, and our life rounded with a sleep is, in truth, pitifully little. But that little seems mysteriously, tremendously important.

And by that token it appears to me that there is no such creature as a living pessimist. The only certain sign of genuine conviction on the part of a pessimist is his suicide. To go on living is to hope for better things — and to hope for them is to bring them about. That is how life appears to me. But are the views of a shrewd bookseller who plays golf of Saturdays of any account?

But enough of my prating. Alicia will doubtless have her way. She is now engaged in the august rites of the younger Randolph's bath. I expect to be summoned to the ceremony at any time. To such small dimensions has my family dwindled that all attention is inevitably centered on the Baby. Laura is thousands of miles away, in California, with the young surgeon she met and married in France; and Jimmie, within two years of college, is summering in a camp on a Canadian island. Randolph Junior reigns supreme. Well, I am content — and long live the King! But they are all as near and dear to me as ever. For as old Burton his "Anatomy" hath it: "No cord nor cable can so forcibly draw or hold so fast, as love can do with a twined thread."

I see life stretching and dynamic before me, glittering

with possibility as the atmosphere sometimes glitters in the sunlight with flittering dancing, revolving points — for eyes made like mine. Though late in starting, I must plunge into the life of responsibility, helping, how slightly soever, to join the long generations of the past in preparing the dazzling future.

The name of the new time spirit is Responsibility.

At this point Alicia appeared to summon me to the Rites of the Bath and hung for a moment reading over my shoulder.

"I insist upon adding two words to that," she announced, "and they shall be the last."

"It is your privilege, beloved," I agreed and eagerly made way for her. Then Alicia wrote:

"And Love."

THE END

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